

The “Traveller’s Consolation”:

Jefferson, Stoicism, and the Stoic Argument against Esuriency

M. Andrew Holowchak

Abstract

In this paper, I trace out the sizeable Stoic strain in Jefferson’s thoughts on living a good life and dying a proper death. I begin with a précis of Jefferson’s views of the cosmos, deity, good living, death and distress, and proper dying. In the process, I show that Jefferson made purchase of the Stoic view of a noiseless way to live and a right time to die—each in concordance with nature.

There is no reason for you to think that any man has lived long because he has grey hairs or wrinkle; he has not lived long—he has existed long. Seneca, *The Shortness of Life*.

Jefferson writes in reply to a letter from John Adams (8 Apr. 1816): “You ask, if I would agree to live my seventy or rather seventy-three years over again? To which I say, yea. I think with you, that it is a good world on the whole; that it has been framed on a principle of benevolence, and more pleasure than pain dealt out to us.” Almost 10 years later and several months before his death, Jefferson gives to Adams (18 Dec. 1825) a similar reply. “I have enjoyed a greater share of health than falls to the lot of most men; my spirits have never failed me except under those paroxysms of grief which you, as well as myself, have experienced in every form, and with good health and good spirits, the pleasures surely outweigh the pains of life. Why not, then, taste them again, fat and lean together?”

Jefferson’s musings in both letters betray cognitive weighing—a placing of a life’s worth of pleasures and pains on a scale and a cool judgment based on the weighing. So long as one could be assured that pleasure would predominate in one’s “relife,” reliving would be preferable to not reliving. Jefferson seems to be, as he is often taken to be,¹ an Epicurus-

styled utilitarian.

There is, however, a discernible difference of scope in the letters. In both, Jefferson is replying to the question of whether he would choose to relive his life, if that scenario could obtain, and he acknowledges that his life would be worth reliving, because his life has been characterized by a preponderance of pleasure. Yet in his earlier letter, Jefferson says more. Any (or nearly so) human life is worth living. The world has been well constructed, it is good when seen as a whole, and humans on average suffer less pain than pleasure. In spite of the hedonic language, this is not an Epicurean/utilitarian speaking. There is much more than an appeal to the circumstances surrounding his life. There is an appeal to the circumstances surrounding any life. There is an appeal to cosmic goodness and order. The implicit argument is Stoic, not Epicurean.

In this paper, I trace out the sizeable Stoic strain in Jefferson's thoughts on living a good life and dying a proper death.² I begin with a précis of Jefferson's views of the cosmos, deity, good living, death and distress, and proper dying. In the process, I show that Jefferson made purchase of the Stoic view of a noiseless way to live and a right time to die—each in concordance with nature.

Jefferson's Stoic Cosmos

Jefferson writes to William Short (31 Oct. 1819) that he is a disciple of Epicurus, not the Stoics.³ Though his physics has Epicurean elements—that due, no doubt, to the triumph of Newtonian atomism in his time—Jefferson's cosmology and moral thinking, the latter being patterned on the former, are decidedly Stoical. Consequently, his thoughts on living a good life and dying the right sort of death have been largely shaped by Stoics, not Epicurus.

Since Jefferson's cosmology and moral thinking are largely Stoical, one cannot investigate his thoughts on living and dying without investigation of his cosmos, for humans are situated

in and essential parts of a god-ordered and essentially good cosmos. In a letter to John Adams (11 Apr. 1823), he expresses his mature cosmological thinking in the form of four arguments, drawn in schema perhaps directly from Cicero's Stoic character Balbus in the former's *On the Nature of the Gods*⁴ (*De Natura Deorum*, hereafter, *ND*).

First, Jefferson gives an argument from design. The universe both as a whole and in its parts reveals unmistakably to the circumspect investigator design. In such design, one can retrace from effects to causes and ultimately back to a first cause—deity. The centrifugal and centripetal movements of the heavenly bodies and the earth—with its distribution of lands, waters, and air, and its perfectly organized animal and vegetable bodies—are proofs of “design, cause and effect, up to an ultimate cause, a Fabricator of all things from matter and motion.”

At II.4 of *ND*, Balbus says, “When we gaze upward to the sky and contemplate the heavenly bodies, what can be so obvious and so manifest as that there must exist some power possessing transcendent intelligence by whom these things are ruled?” He argues later (II.87) that the cosmos is itself like a statue or painting, which bespeaks an artist, or a moving ship, which bespeaks a steersman. “How then can ... the world, which includes both the works of art in question, the craftsmen who made them, and everything else besides, be devoid of purpose and of reason?”

Second, Jefferson gives an argument from superintendency. Some stars have disappeared; others have come to be. Comets, with their “incalculable courses,” deviate from regular orbits and demand “renovation under other laws.”⁵ Some species of animal have become extinct. “Were there no restoring power, all existences might extinguish successively, one by one, until all should be reduced to a shapeless chaos.” The suggestion very likely does not imply divine intervention, but superintendency in the manner of a thermostat, perfectly functioning to regulate the temperature of a building once set up to do just that.

Balbus the Stoic too gives an argument from governance of the cosmos from *ND* II.73 to II.153. He begins by addressing the mistaken notion that providence (*pronoia*) is a sort of fortune-telling fishwife. Yet that suggests a mistaken picture of a deity that sits outside of, observes, and predicts events. The cosmos is governed by the gods in that it and all its parts were “set in order at the beginning” and are “governed for all time by divine providence”⁶ (II.73–75). So intricate is the order that it cannot just be set in motion at some point in time, it must be in some sense overseen.

Third, Jefferson gives an argument from consensus. He writes with clear hyperbole, “So irresistible are these evidences of an intelligent and powerful Agent that, of the infinite numbers of men who have existed thro’ all time, they have believed, in the proportion of a million at least to Unit, in the hypothesis of an eternal pre-existent Universe.”

Jefferson’s argument is Balbus’s. Balbus argues that the existence of deity is evidenced by the firm and permanent notion of deity in the minds of humans over time. “The main issue is agreed among all men of all nations, inasmuch as all have engraved in their minds an innate belief that the gods exist” (*ND* II.12). That belief only gets strengthened over time, while other firmly held beliefs, such as in the existence in the Hippocentaur or the Chimaera, are vitiated with time. “For time obliterates the inventions of imagination, while [the inventions of imagination] confirm the judgments of nature” (II.5).

Finally, Jefferson gives to an argument from authority. At John 4: 24, he comments, Jesus says that God is spirit (*pneuma*). Jefferson adds correctly that *pneuma*, for the ancients, was deemed a material substance, though a tenuous one. He then appeals to Origen, who speaks similarly of deity. Book 1 of John speaks plainly the words of Jesus: “In the beginning God existed, and reason (or mind) was with God, and that mind was God. This was in the beginning with God. All things were created by it, and without it was made not one thing which was made.” Appeals to authority show that deity preexisted the world, is material, and *pace* the Presbyterians with whom Jefferson perpetually dissented, is one, not three.⁷

Balbus too employs an argument from authority. He cites on behalf of the existence of deity the Stoics Cleanthes, Chrysippus, and Zeno (*ND* II.13–31) as well as Plato (II.33) and Aristotle (II.44)—all of whom would certainly have been authorities twenty-four carat to an ancient reader.⁸

Jefferson's Stoicized Deity

Jefferson employed often “deity” and “god” in writings. “I pray to God” and “god bless you” occur with great frequency in writings, and he frequently ignored capitalizing the latter, when doing so would not prove offensive to a correspondent. That is not inconsequential.

Yet outside of key letters to intimate correspondents—the 1823 letter to Adams is one—Jefferson seemed never to have had much to say on the nature of deity.

Jefferson, however, wrote enough on deity to enable us to piece together, with a great degree of accuracy, the nature of his god. One must appeal especially to his letters to intimates, his *Literary Commonplace Book*, and his version of the bible. That god is Stoic or Stoic-like.

In his *Literary Commonplace Book*, Jefferson abundantly commonplaces Lord Bolingbroke's religious views from the latter's *Philosophical Works*. Bolingbroke's deity is “sovereignly good, ... almighty and alwise” (§14), and has no difficulty enabling certain types of matter to think (§§11–13). Bolingbroke's god does not intervene in foreordained cosmic events—e.g., through Christ's miracles (§22 and §26), punishment for the fall of man (§15 and §42), or divine superintendency—but establishes once and for all cosmic harmony, as “nothing can be less reconcileable [*sic*] to the notion of an all-perfect being, than the imagination that he undoes by his power in particular cases what his wisdom ... once thought sufficient to be established for all case” (§49)—thus, deism, not theism. Moreover, Bolingbroke's deity has not made “man the final cause of the whole creation” (§16 and §46). Bolingbroke's deity does not communicate his existence through revelation or inspiration, or only to one type of

people (§16, §§20–22, §24, §32). Bolingbroke’s deity does not punish or reward humans in an eternal afterlife, for “justice requires that punishments ... and rewards ... [ought to] be measured [o]ut in various degrees and manners, according to the various [c]ircumstances of particular cases, and in due proportion to them” (§52)—i.e., justice ought to be meted out in this life. The religious law of Bolingbroke’s deity—“the law of nature is the law of god” (§36)—is to be found in nature. “Natural religion represents an allperfect being to our adoration and to our live,” and requires humans to “love the lord thy god with all thy heart” (§56).

Jefferson appropriated Bolingbroke’s conception of god and largely kept that conception throughout his life. Like Bolingbroke and others (e.g., Kames, Hume, Smith, and Tracy) whom Jefferson read and assimilated, Jefferson thought deity was visible in the cosmos. He writes to John Adams (11 Apr. 1823): “When we take a view of the Universe, in it’s parts general or particular, it is impossible for the human mind not to be percieve [*sic*] and feel a conviction of design, consummate skill, and indefinite power in every atom of it’s composition.” Use of “see” and “feel” indicate appropriation of the epistemology of Destutt de Tracy and Lord Kames, each of whom stated deity was immediately perceptible in or felt through the cosmos. Neither invoked an argument from design. That sensual epistemic appropriation is also manifest in a letter to John Adams (15 Aug. 1820) to whom Jefferson states paranomastically in the manner of Descartes: “I feel: therefore I exist. ... On the basis of sensation, of matter and motion, we may erect the fabric of all the certainties we can have or need.” There is no appeal to reason.

Jefferson depicts the attributes of deity in both letters to Adams. As we have already seen in the 1823 letter, he says that God is the designer and “fabricator of all things from matter and motion, their preserver and regulator while permitted to exist in their present forms, and their regenerator into new and other forms.” God is a “superintending power” that “maintains the Universe in it’s course and order.” Regeneration and superintendency are attributed to deity because of new discoveries in astronomy—“Stars, well known, have disappeared, new ones

have come into view”—and in biology—“certain races of animals are become extinct.” In the 1820 letter, he states that all things—“the human soul, angels, god”—are matter, for if not, “they are *nothings*.” He cites John Locke, A.L.C. Destutt de Tracy, and Dugald Stewart as authorities for his materialism.

Was Jefferson a deist, like Balbus and Bolingbroke, or a theist? Some writings, especially early ones, offer evidence of deism. He writes to Dr. Benjamin Rush (23 Sept. 1800) concerning the yellow-fever epidemic in Philadelphia: “When great evils happen, I am in the habit of looking out for what good may arise from them as consolations to us, and Providence has in fact so established the order of things, as that most evils are the means of producing some good.” Here the suggestion is that of a pre-established order, implying nonintervention and deism. Yet the 1823 letter to Adams speaks of god as a regenerator or superintendent—implying periodic intervention and theism.

On settling this bristly issue, Jefferson’s 1820 bible has a bearing. Reconstructing the works of the four evangelists in the New Testament, Jefferson was insistent on removing all thaumaturgy—“things against the course of nature” (TJ to William Short, 4 Aug. 1820). He cites “calves speaking” and “statues sweating blood” as illustrations. Hence, passages in which Jesus feeds a great crowd with two fish and five loaves of bread (Matthew 15: 32–38) or brings back to life a dead young woman (Matthew 9: 18–26) are excised. Insistence that all thaumaturgy be removed from his bible, believed to be the real life and words of Jesus, is another way of Jefferson, following Bolingbroke, saying that god, through Jesus’s miracles, “undoes by his power in particular cases what his wisdom ... once thought sufficient to be established for all case”—*viz.*, that he allows for periodic exceptions to the laws of nature—evidence of divine impotency, not divine omnipotency. Thus, divine superintendency is best explained for Jefferson by a deity that is either equivalent to the cosmos (a Stoic deity) or a deity that has built superintendency into the cosmos in the manner of a builder who fashions a thermostat for a house to regulate its temperature. Theism is unneeded.

Nonetheless, such a god, creator of an enormous cosmos, is not a being to whom a person would sing or pray. Such a god could take no notice of song or prayer by creatures, beautifully constructed and essential parts of the cosmos, but nonetheless relatively inconsequential. Such a god could care nowise of its name being spelled by humans with a lowercase “g.”

Yet the existence of the cosmos is one miracle in which Jefferson, a disdainer of miracles, believes. And so he considers it to be a moral duty of sensual and rational creatures to pay homage to their creator, because of human awareness of the enormousness, beauty, and perfection of the cosmos. Perhaps the best ways of fulfilling that duty are through science—e.g., study of the cosmic “skeleton” through reading Newton’s *Principia*, examining telescopic and microscopic phenomena like the mysterious hydra, or even participating in scientific farming—or through art—e.g., replicating great figures of human history for future generations through sculpture or painting or innovating in architecture of the sort in the pavilions at the University of Virginia. Thus, Jefferson’s manner of loving deity was certainly Stoic, and his deity, if not some being that predated the cosmos, just might have been equivalent to the cosmos, just as god was for the Stoics.

Jefferson’s Stoicized Morality

Though Jefferson’s deity was deaf to supplication, he claimed that love of deity and love of others were the axial principles of morality,⁹ and that differs nowise from the Stoics.

That noted, in two respects, Jefferson’s views on morality were miles apart from the Stoics. While Jefferson posited a moral sense, which literally sensed morally correct action if not occluded by reason, for the Stoics, morally correct action was a matter of appeal to the judgment of a monolithically rational soul. Moreover, he found Stoic equanimity, involving riddance of all passions, which were deemed violent contractions or swellings of the rational soul due to mistakes of reasoning, an impossible ideal. Jefferson, in his earlier “relief” letter to Adams, writes, “The perfection of the moral character is, not in a Stoical apathy, so

hypocritically vaunted, and so untruly too, because impossible, but in a just equilibrium of all the passions (*pathē*).” For Jefferson, human passions are an inescapable part of the human soul. They are to be mastered—set in a “just equilibrium”—not eradicated.

Such differences noted, Jefferson’s moral sense functioned in a manner almost identical to that of the Stoics’ rational faculty. The Stoics posited no inviolable rules of morality, though there were *decreta* (basal rules) and *praecepta* (circumstance-dependent rules) that were general, but fallible guides of morality. Reason had to factor in circumstances, which made every moral scenario unique, and moral cynosures were significant guides of good behavior, especially for youths. It is the same with Jefferson. Believing that morally correct action was sensed, he could not adopt inviolable rules of moral action. Yet he did, like the Stoics and Adam Smith¹⁰ think that principles could act as rough guides to moral action, especially among the young.

Yet disbelieving both in a monolithic, rational soul and in disavowal of human passions, Jefferson was more like Aristotle than the Stoics. For Aristotle, there were goods other than the virtues. Thus, there were factors outside of human control that influence human happiness. The goods comprising happiness were three: psychical (*aretai* or the virtues), external (e.g., wealth and fame), and bodily (e.g., health and beauty). Human flourishing involved some measure of all goods, but not all goods were equally good. A complete stock of psychical goods without bodily and external goods prevented one from being miserable, though one would not be happy. A complete stock of bodily and external goods without psychical goods led to misery, as if one were without goods of any sort.¹¹ Thus, psychical goods were preeminent. Consequently, qua Stoic, Jefferson was an “impassioned” Stoic. Stoic ethical thinking could be used not as a means of denying the passions, but of controlling them.¹²

Jefferson is manifestly a eudemonist of some persuasion and more in the Aristotelian than the Stoic mold insofar as the passions are concerned. His addresses and correspondence indicate

that he has a very definite notion of the good life, which involves virtuous activity through exercise of the moral sense, not reason, as well as some stock of bodily and external goods.

Like the eudemonists, Jefferson asserts that virtue is needed for happiness.¹³ Like Aristotle and against the Stoics,¹⁴ he does not believe virtue is sufficient for happiness. “Health, learning and virtue will insure your happiness,” he writes to Peter Carr (28 May 1788). “They will give you a quiet conscience, private esteem and public honor. Beyond these, we want nothing but physical necessities, and they are easily obtained.” To his daughter Martha (12 Mar. 1781), he links happiness with occupation. To James Madison (9 June 1793), happiness is tied to tranquility. To Mrs. A.J. Marks (12 July 1788), happiness is linked with occupation and tranquility.

Still the recipe is uncompleted. The political dimension is lacking. Numerous writings demonstrate an unbreakable link between happiness and liberty.¹⁵ I offer two illustrations. First and most significantly, there is Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence, where, drawing from Locke’s fundamental rights to life, liberty, and property, Jefferson posits the fundamental rights of life, liberty, and happiness. To Dr. John Manners (12 June 1817), vis-à-vis the objection that humans cannot flourish in America, Jefferson says, “If [deity] has made it a law in the nature of man to pursue his own happiness, He has left him free in the choice of place as well as mode.”¹⁶ Note here how, like the Stoics, Jefferson’s naturalism is both cosmological and anthropological.

Finally, as is the case with Aristotle and the Stoics, human happiness for Jefferson involves no separation of political and private dimensions, against those many scholars who take Jefferson to be a utilitarian of some persuasion. To George Hammond (29 May 1792), he writes, “A nation as a society, forms a moral person, and every member of it is personally responsible for his society.” To Pierre Samuel Dupont de Nemours (24 Apr. 1816), he says, “When we come to the moral principles on which the government is to be administered, we come to what is proper for all conditions of society. ... I believe ... that morality, compassion, generosity, are innate elements of the human constitution.”¹⁷

Stoics on Death and Distress

Jefferson expressly rejected Stoic ethics—it was said to be *hors de prise* as an ethical ideal¹⁸—yet Stoicism drives his ethical thinking more than any other source. He refers always to Stoic readings—Seneca, Antoninus (Marcus Aurelius), Epictetus, and the ethics works of Cicero (fraught with Stoic content)—in letters to key correspondents in which he recommends ethical works,¹⁹ and that can only be explicated by mesmeric, perhaps only subconscious, attraction to them.

Like Cicero, Jefferson recognized the defects of Stoic ethics, yet he was irresistibly drawn to the Stoics, probably because he found irresistible the superordinary demands it made on adherents. That seems to be an extraordinary claim, until one reflects on Jefferson’s temperament. Intolerant of inefficiency and indolence, Jefferson was a demanding person—especially when it came to himself and to those persons most dear to him. Stoic sentiments always seemed to find their way into letters with intimates like John Adams, Joseph Priestley, Peter Carr, Benjamin Rush, his children, and grandchildren. Stoicism, which was commonly appropriated by moralists of Jefferson’s day (e.g., Adam Smith, Francis Hutcheson, and Lord Kames), was the predominant ingredient in his moral-sense frame of reference.

Jefferson was abundantly familiar with Cicero’s *Tusculan Disputations* (hereafter, *TD*)—a work to which he almost always refers in letters to correspondents inquiring about moral readings and one upon which he fell back in times of distress. Cicero, having in mind the inconsolable anguish felt on the recent death of his daughter, cites two philosophically entertained notions of distress (*aegritudo*) apropos the loss of a loved one: (1) distress is a currently existing evil and (2) distress is something that one ought to feel²⁰ (XXXI.74).

Cicero then entertains different philosophical perspectives on the two notions. The Stoic founder Zeno states that there is in addition the opinion that the currently existing “evil” is new (*recens*) and, being new, “it is vigorous and has so to speak greenness (*viriditatem*).”

The remedy for Zeno is showing that the evil is not new. Cleanthes, Zeno's Stoic successor, insists that the way to console one distressed is to show that the evil does not exist—*viz.*, to reject outright notion 1. The hedonist Epicurus insists distress is best alleviated by withdrawing attention from it—out of mind, out of distress—and attending instead to something good. The Cyrenaics think it sufficient to show nothing unexpected has happened. Finally, the Stoic Chrysippus advocates rejection of the notion that one ought to feel distressed—*viz.*, rejection of notion 2 (XXXI.75–76).

Cicero then considers the view of Cleanthes, who argues that loss of another is not an evil. Cleanthes's point is concedable, but Cicero adds, "The time is not right (*alienum*) for the lesson," for only a Stoic sage, a Triton among minnows, can bear such a loss with perfect equanimity. Everyone else, not being fully wise and thus equally non-virtuous, is in a state of moral turpitude, and so the loss of another will be distressful (XXXII.78).

Cicero eventually dismisses all other views and sides with Chrysippus—that one ought to dismiss any notion of a need to feel distressed on the death of another—but acknowledges that that is *opere*. It is hard to prove to a mourner that his mourning, unneeded, is of his own choice (XXXIII.79–80).

Distress is a disease of the soul, Cicero grants with the Stoics, but accedes to the notion that there is a proper course of time—a sentiment worth underscoring—for its riddance. The time for diseases of the soul ought not to be less than the time for bodily diseases, each of which has its proper course in time. In the end, Cicero counsels that a comforter or counselor must (1) show the evil does not exist or is negligible, (2) discuss the common path of human living as well as the idiosyncratic path of the mourner, and (3) prove that one's sorrow is of no advantage to the mourner (XXXII.77). Cicero concludes in complete agreement with Chrysippus, "Whatever evil there is in distress, it is not natural, but has been brought on by a voluntary choice and an error of opinion" (XXXIII.80).

The view of the Later Stoics—Seneca, Aurelius, and Epictetus—is aimed at showing à la Cleanthes that death is not an evil. Seneca tells Lucilius (LXXXII) that nothing is sillier than fear of death, due to its inevitability, yet no fear is more universal among humans than fear of death. People fear death, because it is against their natural inclination toward self-love and self-preservation, and because it relates to the future, about which they are unknowledgeable. Like a miser who clings rapaciously and increasingly to his wealth as he ages so that it is a great encumbrance instead of a relief of encumbrance, the aging man holds on to life in spite of creeping decrepitness.

Writes Marcus Aurelius: “A trite but effective tactic against the fear of death is to think of the list of people who had to be pried away from life. What did they gain by dying old? In the end, they all sleep six feet under.... They had buried their contemporaries and were buried in turn” (IV.50).²¹

Epictetus attends on the argument from inevitability with an argument from fate. All persons have come into being when the cosmos had need of them, not when they wished to come into being. No person had control over the time of his birth, for his coming into being was not up to him. What is not up to a person should not cause him anxiety. Similarly, no person’s passing away is up to him. So, too, no one should fear passing away.²²

Seneca in his *Epistles* (XXIV.18) gives an argument articulated by Socrates in Plato’s *Apology*.²³ Death annihilates one or it strips one bare. If it strips one bare, the better (rational) part—the soul—remains after one has been released from the burden of the body. If it annihilates one, good and ill are removed. Nothing is left. Either way, it is foolish to fear death.

For Stoics, it is not death that is to be dreaded, but the fear of death that is to be overcome. Seneca states in *Epistle* LIV (4–5) that death is nothing to fear, because it is literally nothing. He has tested death before his birth. It is nonexistence. He adds, “We go astray in thinking

that death only follows us, when in reality it has both preceded us and will in turn follow us.” In “Shortness of Life” (VII.3), Seneca adds that one must learn how to live one’s life aright in order to change one’s view of death and expunge the fear of death. Living rightly is an enduring commitment. It takes the whole of one’s life to learn how to live, and so, to one who has learned how to live, death means nothing. It is frightful only to those who lose everything in losing their life.²⁴ Thus, as it is not mere living, but living well that is good, a Stoic will live as long as he must, not as long as he can.²⁵ To that end, a Stoic must, in some measure, deliberate on the opportunities for good living—*viz.*, for the maximal exercise of virtue. Opportunity is everything.

Jefferson assimilated the writings of the Later Stoics, Epictetus especially, and he commonplacated many passages from Cicero’s *TD* in his *Literary Commonplace Book* shortly after the death of his father Peter Jefferson.²⁶ The passages Jefferson selected—§§59–79—predominantly concern fear of death and the distress felt upon the death of another. It is probable that he returned to *TD* or at least to selected passages from it in his *Commonplace Book* after the deaths of his wife, his daughter Maria, close friends Dabney Carr and George Wythe, and others whose death left an unfilled void. It is noteworthy that the soft advice he gives John Adams (13 Oct. 1813) on the loss of his daughter, “Nabby,” is in keeping with Cicero’s Chrysippean advice. Jefferson writes, “I have ever found time and silence the only medicine, and these but assuage, they can never suppress, the deep drawn sign which recollection forever brings up, until recollection and life are extinguished together.”

***Kairos* and the Argument against Esuriency**

The Stoic view of living well as opposed to living long is evidence of their notion of cosmic fit, wherein morally correct action is timely action. That leads to discussion of the Greek concept *kairos*.

By the fifth century B.C., the Ancient Greeks developed and instantiated a concept that would become part of the warp and woof of their culture: *kairos* (“timeliness” or “opportunity”).²⁷ Examples of *kairos* can be found in all aspects of Ancient Greek culture: rhetoric, politics, athletics, tragedy, philosophy, and medicine. The Hippocratic author of *Precepts* distinguishes between *chronos*, time considered in its expanse, and *kairos*, time considered as a moment (usually critical), thus: “Time (*chronos*) is that in which opportunity (*kairos*) exists, and opportunity is that in which there is not much time. Healing is a matter of time, but at times also a matter of opportunity.” In his *Fables*, Aesop writes of the god *Kairos*: “Running swiftly, balancing on the razor’s edge, bald but with a lock of hair on his forehead, he wears no clothes; if you grasp him from the front, you might be able to hold him, but once he has moved on not even Zeus himself can pull him back: this is a symbol of *Kairos* (Opportunity), the brief moment in which things are possible.” In *Ajax*, Sophocles writes of the right time (*es auton kairon*) for burial of Ajax’s corpse. In *Republic*, Plato speaks of the right moments (*tous kairous kalos apergazesthai*) for doing well one’s work. Pausanias in *Description of Greece* tells of the altar and statue of the god *Kairos* near the gate to the stadium. “Quite close to the entrance to the stadium [at Olympia] are two altars; one they call the altar of Hermes of the Games, the other the altar of *Kairos* (Opportunity).” Athletic excellence, like moral excellence, is often a matter of seizing opportunity when it briefly appears.

Kairos was a feature of Greek culture that would have been readily cognizable to anyone acquainted fully with those ancients. Much of the philosophy of Jefferson’s time, for example, was an appropriation, with modifications, of Greek naturalism, especially Aristotelian or Stoic naturalism, of which *kairos* was a significant part. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, for illustration, Aristotle writes that morally correct action is a matter of acting “for the right reasons, with the right people, ... in the right way, at the right time, and for the right length of time.” In Jefferson’s day, Pierre Charron writes in *On Wisdom*, a book Jefferson often recommended to friends for its moral content, in the manner of Aristotle. “The doing Things pertinently and properly, in due Method, and Time, and Measure, is the Effect of

Wisdom, and that which makes the Soul and its Attainments truly valuable.”²⁸ Jefferson, like others fully acquainted with Ancient Greek culture, appropriated and instantiated *kairos* in his manner of punctilious, efficient living.

Kairos fashioned Jefferson’s views on later-in-life inaction concerning the eradication of slavery, preference of embargo versus war with England in his second term as president, the notion of an “empire for liberty” in the foreseeable future, and people not being democratized (e.g., the French, American Indians, and Russians) before they are ready to be democratized, *inter alia*.

Kairos was also behind Jefferson’s belief that the generations of humans were roughly independent of each other. That is why he both countenanced constitutional renewal with each generation—there is, he writes to Washington (7 Nov. 1792), “the expediency of a constitution alterable only by a special convention” at specified intervals of time—and embraced the principle to James Madison (6 Sept. 1789) that no generation should be bound to the debts of the prior generation, because “the earth belongs in usufruct to the living.”

There is another appropriation of *kairos* that Jefferson made. It concerned the right time to die. That he got from his reading of Stoicism through the works of the Later Stoics and the Stoic-leaning Cicero. In a letter to his pupil Lucilius (LXX), Seneca states that when the time is right, one who has lived the right sort of life will choose the right sort of death. “Everyone ought to make his life acceptable to all others, but his death to himself. It is the best death that pleases us.” Epictetus in *Discourses* (IV.106) gives more straightforwardly the argument. When the Olympic Games are over, he says, certain spectators always linger with the vain, greedy hope of still seeing athletes compete. It is the same with life. Many hold on to life, when the time for them to depart has come. “Make room for others. Others still must be born, just as you were born,” writes Epictetus. “Once born, they must have land, houses, and provisions. If the first-dwellers do not move along, what is left for those who follow? Why are you insatiate? Why are you unsatisfied? Why do you crowd the cosmos?”

For the Stoics, thus, there is not only a right way to live—actions always done opportunely—but also a right time to die, *viz.*, what might be dubbed the Stoic argument against esuriency.

Jefferson was clearly aware of the Stoic argument against esuriency—the general human tendency to cling rapaciously to life at the expense of younger generations of humans. That too followed from his embrace of *kairos*. To Benjamin Rush (17 Aug. 1811), he writes, “There is a fulness [*sic*] of time when men should go, and not occupy too long the ground to which others have a right to advance.” To John Adams (1 Aug. 1816), he says, “There is a ripeness of time for death, regarding others as well as ourselves, when it is reasonable we should drop off and make room for another growth. When we have lived our generation out, we should not wish to encroach on another. I enjoy good health: I am happy in what is around me, yet I assure you I am ripe for leaving all, this year, this day, this hour.” To Henry Dearborn (17 Aug. 1821), he states: “Man, like the fruit he eats, has his period of ripeness. Like that, too, if he continues longer hanging to the stem, it is but an useless and unsightly appendage.” To Mrs. Katherine Duane Morgan (26 June 1822), he says: “Time, which wears all things, does not spare the energies of body and mind of a *presque octogenaire*. While I could, I did what I could, and now acquiesce cheerfully in the law of nature which, by unfitting us for action, warns us to retire and leave to the generation of the day the direction of its own affairs.”

There is, moreover, the prospect of outliving one’s friends and one’s time. To John Page (25 June 1804), he writes disconsolately of outliving others of one’s time—especially one’s friends. He adds consolatorily: “We have, however, the traveller’s [*sic*] consolation. Every step shortens the distance we have to go; the end of our journey is in sight, the bed wherein we are to rest, and to rise in the midst of the friends we have lost.” To Maria Cosway (27 Dec. 1820), he writes of being the last alive of one’s time—of being “a solitary trunk in a desolate field, from which all its former companions have disappeared.” To Francis Van Der Kemp (11 Jan. 1825), he says that looking back on the days of his youth is like “looking over a field of battle, for “all [whom I had known] all dead!”²⁹

Jefferson, furthermore, acknowledges a certain *tedium vitae* apropos of old age. He writes sympathetically to Abigail Adams (11 Jan. 1817) of a friend who grew tired of “pulling off his shoes and stockings at night, and putting them on again in the morning.”³⁰ The remedy he prescribes is Epictetus’s—i.e., “to be contented with the good things which the master of the feast places before us, and to be thankful for what we have, rather than to be thoughtful about what we have not.”³¹ In a letter to John Adams (12 Oct. 1823), Jefferson writes of “hoary winter of age,” when staying warm is a preoccupation. As is his wont, the hoariness, gelidity and heaviness are salved by occupation. He mentions the University of Virginia as a “Hobby ... whose easy amble is still sufficient to give exercise and amusement to an Octogenarian rider.”

Because of the inevitability of physical and mental decay, because of the prospect of living beyond one’s time, and because of the *tedium vitae*, Jefferson, like Epictetus, acknowledges there is a right time to die. Is that advocacy of suicide?

Jefferson says nothing definite concerning his own inclination or disinclination toward suicide. There are a few passages that offer evidence, though of a gossamery sort, that suicide is no ill. First, in his *Literary Commonplace Book*, Jefferson copies a passage from the *Tusculan Disputations* about Marcus Porcius Cato’s suicide, shortly after the Battle of Thapsus in 46 B.C.

For the God who is master within us forbids our departure without his permission; but when God Himself has given a valid reason as he did in the past to Socrates, and in our day to Cato, and often to many others, then of a surety your true wise man will joyfully pass forthwith from the darkness here into the light beyond. All the same he will not break the bonds of his prison-house—the laws forbid it—but as if the obedience to a magistrate or some lawful authority, he will pass out at the summons and release of God.³²

Commonplacing the passage suggests countenance. Second, in his “Bill for Proportioning

Crimes and Punishments,” Jefferson opposes criminal sanctions against suicide. “If one can be found who can calmly determine to renounce life, who is so weary of his existence here as rather to make experiment of what is beyond the grave, can we suppose him, in such a state of mind, susceptible to influence from the losses to his family by confiscation?” Such persons are legally termed insane, but that term does more to describe the general human tendency to cling to life at all costs.³³ Jefferson at least acknowledges that the proposed penalty of confiscation of the property of one’s extant family is unlikely to be a deterrent to one, tired of living. Finally, as I mention earlier, his Declaration of Independence champions a right to life. If one’s life is to be one’s own, so too is to be one’s death, it might be argued. None of these, however, unreservedly decides the issue.

Still, I suspect that in spite of Jefferson’s distaste of esuriency, he was not committed to suicide in times of great debilitation. He merely contented himself with getting out of the way so the next generation could fall into place without the obstructions of the older generation, superannuated and exhausted.

The Afterlife

It seems appropriate to end with Jefferson’s thoughts on the afterlife. Were they Stoic? The Stoic stance on an afterlife is unclear.

It is probable that the Early Stoics believed in an afterlife of some form. Chrysippus, for instance, countenanced an infinite number of cosmic life cycles—each identical with every other. That implies that each person would come to be once again and live again in the same way his life.³⁴ Yet that notion was a *cause célèbre* that prompted considerable debate in antiquity.³⁵

Of the Later Stoics—Seneca, Epictetus, and Aurelius—only the latter in his *Meditations* (II.14) explicitly mentions cosmic cyclicity of some sort, which allows for the possibility of

reliving in the manner stated by Chrysippus. Seneca, we have seen, allows for the possibility of an afterlife, but seems to favor death as permanent annihilation. Epictetus in *Discourses* (e.g., IV.31–32) shows no preference for an afterlife or for death as annihilation.

Jefferson's view of an afterlife seems equally shrouded by uncertainty.³⁶ He often writes openly about the possibility of life after death,³⁷ yet his thoughts on the afterlife are always *obiter dicta*—viz., things said courteously to placate a correspondent. That could merely be in keeping with his tendency not to engage in meretricious metaphysical discussions, incapable of resolution. To Rev. Isaac Story (5 Dec. 1801), Jefferson refuses to speculate on the transmigration of souls, because “the laws of nature have withheld from us the means of physical knowledge of the country of spirits” and revelation has left people in the dark. As he writes to John Adams (14 Oct. 1816), “When I meet with a proposition beyond finite comprehension, I abandon it as I do a weight which human strength cannot lift, and I think ignorance in these cases is truly the softest pillow on which I can lay my head.” Such guardedness, for example, is evident at the end of a letter to J. Correa de Serra (25 Nov. 1817), in which Jefferson calls the afterlife a “great problem, untried by the living, unreported by the dead.”

An 1820 letter to John Adams (Aug. 15), however, gives telling evidence that Jefferson thought the soul or mind does not survive the death of the body. Thought is to a bodily organ as magnetism is to a needle or elasticity is to a spring. Ignition of the needle and spring cause the cessation of the magnetism of the needle and the elasticity of the spring. He concludes analogically, “So on dissolution of the material organ by death, its action of thought may cease also, and that nobody supposes that the magnetism or elasticity retire to hold a substantive and distinct existence.” Soul, he adds Stoically, is nothing other than matter of some special sort. This letter, written to a confidant and late in life, very probably expresses his true view of the likelihood of an afterlife: It is improbable. Other letters late in life convey a similar message.³⁸ All, however, leave open the possibility of living again, if the cosmos is phoenix, as Chrysippus thought it was. Yet Jefferson says nothing on the topic of a phoenix

cosmos, and where he is silent, it is better to respect his silence than to speculate.

Upshot

Like the Stoics, Jefferson believed that the measure of a man is not merely certain words left behind at a particular time, but the tenor of his life as a whole.³⁹ The tenor of his life showed Jefferson to be a living Stoic.

First, following Seneca—who states that one ought never to strive either for what one cannot achieve or for what, once achieved, will show the shallowness of one’s striving⁴⁰—Jefferson always aimed to be occupied by meritorious activities and to be economical and productive in such activities. There was no virtue in idleness or in ignoble, fruitless activity.

Moreover, he seemed almost obsessed with acting *ad rem* and opportunely. He took up matters, such as Western exploration and the University of Virginia, when the time was opportune, and overpassed other matters, such a slavery and primary-school reform, when the time was inopportune. When he had outlived his proper time, he fronted death with the cool resignation and courage of a man who regretted nothing and was willing to do it over, if deity should allow. As is well known, he and John Adams passed away on July 4 of 1826—50 years after the Declaration of Independence—certainly, a kairoitic day. When he was waked at 9 a.m. in the morning on that day to take his laudanum, he said, “No, doctor, nothing more.”

As he aged, it might be that death was to Jefferson a “traveller’s [*sic*] consolation,” but I trust it can be fairly said that life, in the words of his beloved Laurence Sterne, was for the most part a “sentimental journey”—a voyage under the guidance of one’s heart (morality), not one’s head (intellect)—and that Jefferson, following Sterne, was no “simple,” “idle,” “inquisitive,” “lying,” “proud,” “vain,” “splenetic,” “necessitous,” “delinquent,” “felonious,” “unfortunate,” or “innocent traveller,” but, like Sterne, a “sentimental traveller.” As Sterne

sums, “What a large volume of adventure may be grasped within this little span of life by him who interests his heart in everything, and who having eyes to see, what time and change are perpetually holding out to him as he journeyeth on his way, misses nothing he can *fairly* lay his hand on.”⁴¹ Jefferson concurs. “It is unfortunate that most people think the occurrences passing daily under the eyes,” he writes to John Page (4 May 1786), “are either known to all the world, or not worth being known. They therefore do not give them place in their letters.” Jefferson’s and Sterne’s worlds were Stoical, as everywhere one turned, one could see the hand of deity. Thus, it is easy to see why Jefferson thought life worth reliving.

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Epictetus, *Discourses*, III.xxiv.94. See also Pierre Charron, *On Wisdom, Vol. 3*, trans. George Stanhope (London, 1729).

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NOTES

¹ E.g., Carl J. Richard, “A Dialogue with the Ancients: Thomas Jefferson and Classical Philosophy and History,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, 9, 1989, 439; Charles A. Miller, *Jefferson and Nature: An Interpretation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 23; Dumas Malone, *Jefferson the Virginian* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1948, 108; Karl Lehmann, *Thomas Jefferson: American Humanist* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1985), 139 ff.; and Meyer Reinhold, “The Classical World,” *Thomas Jefferson: A Reference Biography*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Charles Scribners’ Sons, 1986), 152–53.

² On Jefferson’s Stoicism, Chinard writes: “The young Virginian made us, for a short time only, of the critical reasoning employed by [Lord Bolingbroke], but when it came to building anew, he gathered all the material, stone by stone and maxim by maxim, from the old Greek Stoics. ... During this early period of his life and when he had rejected the Christian system of ethics, the young Virginian found the moral props he needed in Homer’s simple code of honor and friendship; in echoes from the Greek Stoics discovered in Cicero; and through them also was revealed to him a conception of patriotism and devotion to public duty which was to mold the rest of his life.” Gilbert Chinard, *Thomas Jefferson: The Apostle of Americanism* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1929), 26.

³ Jefferson’s Epicurus comes to him from Gassendi’s *Syntagma*, more an misappropriation of Epicureanism than an explication of it. As Wilson notes, Jefferson “owned no book in his library of which Epicurus was the author.” Douglas L. Wilson, “Sowerby Revisited: The Unfinished Catalogue of Thomas Jefferson’s Library,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 4, 1984, 625.

⁴ Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, [1933] 2000).

⁵ Why comets should present themselves as a difficulty for Jefferson that requires further study and subsumption under heretofore undiscovered laws is unclear. As their paths were explicable by the law of gravitation and the laws of bodily motion, they presented no difficulty to the Newtonian physicist.

⁶ For more on the cosmos, see M. Andrew Holowchak, *The Stoics: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum Books, 2008), 20–21.

⁷ Cf. John Locke, *Questions concerning the Law of Nature*, eds. Robert Horwitz, Jenny Strauss Clay, and Diskin Clay (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 159–69.

⁸ Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*, II.33 and 44, respectively.

⁹ TJ to Thomas Law, 13 June 1814.

¹⁰ For Smith, positing moral sentiment and not a moral sense, humans have first perceptions of right and wrong action, based in “immediate sense and feeling,” and from those perceptions over time, general rules are fashioned. While the rules of prudence, charity, generosity, gratitude, and friendship

are “loose and inaccurate,” those of jurisprudence are fairly strict. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1984), 159–74 and 320.

¹¹ EN 1098b13–18. For a fuller discussion, see M. Andrew Holowchak, *Happiness and Greek Ethical Thought* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008), chap. 2.

¹² In fairness to the Stoics, they never categorically rejected all passions. They believed in good passions (*eupathē*), which were mild contractions or swellings of the soul in accord with reason, as contrasted to the violent contractions or swellings of the soul when reason ran afoul.

¹³ TJ to Amos J. Cook, 21 Jan. 1816.

¹⁴ Charron, a near contemporary of Jefferson, wrote like Aristotle that there were excellences of the body: e.g., health, beauty, agility and dexterity. “Health is infinitely above all; Health is the loveliest, the most desirable, the richest Present in the Power of Nature to make. Pierre Charron, *Wisdom: Three Books*, second edition, trans. George Stanhope (London: 1707), 32.

¹⁵ Cf. Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Memoirs of the Year Two Thousand Five Hundred* (Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson, 1795), 259.

¹⁶ See also TJ to Jean Baptiste Ternant, 23 Feb. 1793; TJ to Madame de Lafayette, 16 Mar. 1793; TJ to Thomas Cooper, 29 Nov. 1802; TJ to Joseph Priestley, 29 Nov. 1802; TJ to Thaddeus Kosciusko, 26 Feb. 1810; TJ to A.C.V.C. Destuit de Tracy, 26 Jan. 1811; TJ to George Tincknor, 25 Nov. 1817; TJ to Samuel Adams Wells, 12 May 1819; and TJ to Judge Spencer Roane, 6 Sept. 1819.

¹⁷ See also, TJ to John Adams, 28 Feb. 1796, and TJ to Miles King, 26 Sept. 1814.

¹⁸ TJ to William Short, 31 Oct. 1819.

¹⁹ E.g., included Robert Skipwith (1771), Bernard Moore (ca. 1773), Walker Maury (1785), Samuel Henley (1785), nephew Peter Carr (1785 and 1787), Archibald Stuart (1795), William G. Munford (1798), Joseph C. Cabell (1800), Richard Mentor Johnson (10 Mar. 1808), John Wyche (1809), Samuel R. Demarre (1809), John Minor (1814), and William Hilliard (1824).

²⁰ Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, trans. J.E. King (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, [1927] 1966).

²¹ Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. C.R. Haines (Cambridge: Harvard University Press [1916] 1999).

²² Epictetus, *Discourses*, III.xxiv.94. See also Pierre Charron, *On Wisdom, Vol. 3*, trans. George Stanhope (London, 1729), 1445.

²³ Plato, *Apology*, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1981), 40c–41b. Cf. Cicero’s *Tusculan Disputations*, I.49.

²⁴ Seneca, *De Brevitate Vitae, Moral Essays*, trans. John W. Basore (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, [1932] 2001).

²⁵ Charron in *La sagesse*, an ethical work Jefferson recommended to John Minor (30 Aug. 1814), gives the argument from esuriency. Pierre Charron, *Wisdom: Three Books*, second edition, trans. George Stanhope (London: 1707), 277.

²⁶ Thomas Jefferson, *Jefferson's Literary Commonplace Book*, ed. Douglas L. Wilson (Princeton University Press, 1989), 17.

²⁷ The term was used early on by Homer (fl. 775 B.C.) to mean “mortal,” and only took on “timeliness” with the work of Theognis, (fl. sixth century B.C.). See Phillip Sipiora and James S. Baumlin, *Rhetoric and Kairos: Essays in History, Theory and Practice* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002).

²⁸ Pierre Charron, *On Wisdom, Vol. 3*, trans. George Stanhope (London, 1729), 1234.

²⁹ See also TJ to James Maury, 25 Apr. 1812.

³⁰ Cf. Seneca, *Epistles*, XXIV.26.

³¹ Cf. Epictetus, *Encheiridion*, trans. W.A. Oldfather (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, [1928] 2000), §15.

³² Thomas Jefferson, *Jefferson's Literary Commonplace Book*, 57.

³³ Thomas Jefferson, *Memoir, Correspondence, and Miscellanies from the Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 1, ed. Thomas Jefferson Randolph (Dodo Press, [1830] 2007), 125.

³⁴ Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, VII.23. 309

³⁵ Alexander, *On Aristotle's Prior Analytics*, CLXXX.33–36. 309–10.

³⁶ Conkin asserts without much expatiation Jefferson “always was confident of life after death.” He adds, “Belief in a single, creative, providential god, and in some form of rewards and punishments after death, seemed essential because they were so directly relevant both to private and public conduct.” It is one thing to assert that belief in a hereafter influences beneficially human conduct. Yet that would commit Jefferson to a sort of pragmatic justification, indifferent to the reality or unreality of a hereafter, for the hereafter. The argument is scrimpy. Paul K. Conkin, “The Religious Pilgrimage of Thomas Jefferson,” *Jeffersonian Legacies*, ed. Peter S. Onuf (Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1993), 20-1 and 24.

³⁷ E.g., TJ to John Adams, 5 July 1814; TJ to Marquis de Lafayette, 14 Feb. 1815; TJ to John Adams,

13 Nov. 1818; and TJ to George Thacher, 26 Jan. 1824.

³⁸ See also TJ to John Adams, 14 Mar. 1820; TJ to John Adams, 8 Jan. 1825; and to Francis Adrian van der Kemp, 11 Jan. 1825.

³⁹ TJ to George Logan, 20 June 1816.

⁴⁰ Seneca, *Tranquility of the Soul*, XII.1

⁴¹ Laurence Sterne, *Sentimental Journey* (New York, Penguin Books, [1768], 1986), 51.

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Dr M. Andrew Holowchak is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at University of the Incarnate Word in San Antonio, Texas. He has published some 100 peer-reviewed papers in areas such as ethics, psychoanalysis, ancient philosophy and science, philosophy of sport, and social and political philosophy and has authored six books and over 50 articles on Thomas Jefferson.

Email: mholowchak@hotmail.com