Book Review | Dutiful Correspondent: Philosophical Essays on Thomas Jefferson

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Published online: 18 July 2014
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During his lifetime Jefferson was incredibly prolific, writing a number of speeches, thousands of letters, political pamphlets like A Summary View of the Rights of British America, and his only book, Notes on the State of Virginia. In Dutiful Correspondent, Holowchak betrays an expert's familiarity with these texts which allows him to paint an immaculately researched picture of Jefferson's philosophical views. Holowchak has provided an important and interesting contribution to the philosophical literature on Jefferson, which is noticeably sparse. In Dutiful Correspondent, we are granted a detailed introduction to Jefferson’s thought on a wide range of topics. Everything from Jefferson’s views on the moral teachings of Jesus and Epicurus, to the role of education in a fledgling republic, and his commitments to empirical science and naturalism are on display in twelve chapters that span seven distinct sections. This book will surely prove to be an essential resource for those seeking an introduction to the spectrum of Jefferson’s thought as a whole.

Section I contains Chapter 1, “Jefferson as ‘Philologist,’” and focuses on Jefferson’s intense love of words, languages, and books as well as his deep commitment to keeping up with an intense routine of correspondence. Section II covers Jefferson’s political thought and is made up of two chapters: “Jefferson’s Great Experiment,” and “Jefferson’s Liberal Eudaimonism.” Chapters 4 and 5, on Jefferson’s views of Epicurus and Jesus, make up the whole of section III. Section IV focuses on Jefferson’s thoughts on Philosophy and Science, and includes a chapter on each. “Reason and the Moral Sense,”

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and “Jefferson on War and Peace” round out section V on Jefferson’s ethics. Section VI, which details Jefferson’s controversial views on race, includes two chapters: “Jefferson on African Americans,” and “Jefferson on American Indians.” Section VII contains the concluding chapter of the book, “Education as Lifelong Learning,” which describes Jefferson’s commitment to the idea that a healthy republic requires educated citizens.

The book’s strengths also give rise to associated trade-offs. Because the book covers so much ground, the chapters act more as stand-alone essays than as a sustained treatment of Jefferson’s thought as a whole. Although there are themes that reappear throughout the book, (i.e. Jefferson’s commitment to empirical science and naturalism, or Jefferson’s adoption of moral sense theory) the chapters themselves can feel disjointed and lacking in unity. This manifests itself in a few ways. Primarily, the disjointed nature of the chapters means that Holowchak is often forced to review material that has already been covered. For example, some variation on Jefferson’s ethics is covered in just about every chapter of the book. Unfortunately, these discussions feel less like a single unifying thread, and more like a rehash of material. Furthermore, the sheer breadth of Holowchak’s project in *Dutiful Correspondent* forces the book to act as an introduction to Jefferson. There is just not enough space for Holowchak to analyze, in much depth, the dimensions of Jefferson’s philosophical thought.

As it would be impossible to say much in depth about the many points that Holowchak covers, I will focus for the remainder of this review on the issue that interested me the most, namely Holowchak’s defense of Jefferson in “Jefferson and African Americans.” In this chapter the author makes a number of arguments that aim to show that i) on the whole, Jefferson was not a racist and ii) scholars who categorize him in this way are being unfair, and “revisionist.” Let us begin with the latter. Holowchak gives three arguments to show that academics, and scholars, if they wish to remain objective, cannot use terms like ‘racist’ to refer to historical figures. The first argument explains that terms like ‘racist’ have “pejorative emotive content,” which overbalances their descriptive content. That is, the word ‘racist’ has both pejorative and descriptive aspects but when we use the term in certain contexts the pejorative aspect takes over. Holowchak argues that descriptively, a racist is someone who unfairly discriminates against some race because of differences that do not in fact exist. Pejoratively, the term ‘racist’ refers to malicious or hateful individuals. Holowchak believes that because scholars will be unable to control the pejorative or emotive aspect of the language, terms like ‘racist’ “have no place in serious scholarship, whether it is of the descriptive or normative sort” (209).

I do not find this argument convincing. After all, there are plenty of words that have unpleasant connotations, but to suggest that these words cannot be employed by
academics merely because of an unfortunate associated connotation seems absurd. Take for example the term ‘slave owner.’ Descriptively, a slave owner was a person who owned human beings as personal property and profited from their labor. But this term also contains an emotive aspect. There are connotations and unpleasant baggage that come with the term ‘slave owner.’ When we hear the term ‘slave owner’ we might feel a sensation of disgust at what we now view as a set of inhumane and abhorrent practices. Slave owners are thought of as cruel and malicious. It seems that, by Holowchak’s logic, academics who wish to remain objective should not refer to historical figures as ‘slave owners’ because this term evokes unpleasant emotive content that we cannot control. Since we cannot ensure that our readers will focus solely on the descriptive meaning of the term, we should not employ it at all. But surely we must be able to refer to historical figures like Jefferson as slave owners, as Holowchak does, without jeopardizing our academic integrity.

The second argument that Holowchak furnishes is a slight variation on the first and explains that a term like ‘racist’ is a value judgment and not a descriptive term (209). The job of historians, Holowchak argues, is to offer unbiased historical accounts that are not polluted with the historian’s own judgments. When a historian uses terms like ‘racist’ to describe historical figures or events, that historian is clouding the discussion with personal, subjective judgments.

There are a few problems with this argument. One, Holowchak is inconsistent because he states in the previous paragraph that the word ‘racist’ has both descriptive and pejorative content (208). Holowchak suggests in the previous argument that the problem with using ‘racist’ is that despite being a descriptive term, we cannot control the emotions it will evoke in others when we use it. But this would mean that ‘racist’ acts as more than mere value judgment. Either the word does refer to some descriptive fact about the world or it does not. Holowchak cannot have this both ways.

We might read Holowchak as advocating the position that historians should not be in the business of providing value judgments. I have no personal stand to take in the debate on what historians should or should not do, but it seems to me that if this is Holowchak’s argument, it is weaker than he needs. Moral and political philosophers, (who happen to be the most likely to be interested in the philosophy of Thomas Jefferson) do not seem to view their projects as merely descriptive or value-free. What then could Holowchak say to the philosopher interested in Thomas Jefferson, about Jefferson’s supposed racism?

Finally, Holowchak provides a third argument to show that academics must not use terms like ‘racist’ if they aim to remain objective. Holowchak believes academics that use terms
like 'racist' make a misstep insofar as these terms are being used in an anachronistic way. The simple thought here is that one should not evaluate the practices of past figures through the lens of our “current moral perch” (Holowchak, 209). If we were sufficiently wealthy white male land owners in the south in the 18th century, we would likely have owned slaves and found no problem with this. Here, Holowchak claims that there are two problems with academics labeling Jefferson a racist. First, to do so requires that an academic pass judgment on some historical figure or practice by analyzing it with our contemporary moral standards (209). Secondly, this requires individual academics to believe that they are in a position of moral superiority to Jefferson, when they are not. Holowchak argues that any academic who labels Jefferson a racist is claiming that if they had lived in Jefferson’s time and under similar circumstances, they would have seen slavery for the evil that it is. This is arrogant and unlikely (209).

I find this last argument, like the other two arguments in defense of Jefferson, lacking. Holowchak's claim that we should not judge past actions or figures from our “current moral perch” hinges on an assumed commitment to cultural or moral relativism that his readers may not share. This is a background assumption that Holowchak needs to defend if his argument is to succeed. Secondly, I think the claim that we should not label Jefferson a racist because of the unique times and circumstances in which he lived is built on shaky ground. Holowchak may be right in thinking that if we were sufficiently wealthy white male landowners in the south during Jefferson's day we too would have been slave owners, and would not have found the practice morally objectionable. But it does not necessarily follow from this that we must not judge Jefferson lest we claim some unearned moral superiority. Instead, I think it's perfectly plausible and consistent to say that if we were slave owners in the 18th century American south, we too would have been morally blameworthy. That is, I can see no reason why academics who refer to Jefferson as a racist must necessarily claim that they would have done differently.

Later in “Jefferson and African Americans,” Holowchak faces the charge of racism head on. He argues that Jefferson was in fact not a racist because racism (descriptively it seems) requires prejudice, whereas Jefferson's claims were empirical in nature and were offered as part of an ongoing scientific dialogue (214). Holowchak defines racism as including a prejudicial moment, and then goes on to show that Jefferson reached his views on the inferiority of African Americans not through prejudice, but rather through faulty empirical observation. Holowchak provides textual evidence that shows Jefferson tempering his claims about the inferiority of African Americans with caveats about his limited sphere of personal observation (210). Holowchak takes this as evidence that Jefferson was not prejudging African Americans, but instead was making faulty inferences based on shoddy empirical evidence. Thus Jefferson's statements on the inferiority of African Americans
narrowly escape the precise definition of racism supplied by Holowchak. Jefferson then, is not a racist in Holowchak's eyes, but rather a poor scientist.

Holowchak is right in pointing out Jefferson’s claims about observational biases, but I think he goes too far in concluding that Jefferson’s claims of racial inferiority bore no prejudicial component. To be sure of this prejudicial component would require access to Jefferson’s mental states and intentions at the time he wrote Notes. Unfortunately for us, and as Holowchak has most forcefully asserted in defense of Jefferson, we do not now have nor will we ever have such access (209). This suggests that Holowchak is overstating his case. It seems to me that, by his own standards, the best that Holowchak can do is to suggest that his readers remain agnostic on the subject of Jefferson’s alleged racism.

I will take this opportunity to offer an alternative argumentative strategy that Holowchak might use in his defense of Jefferson. I don't view this argument as providing a definitive answer on the question of Jefferson's racism, about which I will remain skeptical for the purposes of this review. Instead, I think that this argument merely gives us reason to take Jefferson's claims about African Americans in Notes with a grain of salt. To see this strategy we first need to place Jefferson's Notes on the State of Virginia into its larger historical context.

A popular view among European naturalists of Jefferson's day explained that the unique climate of the new world would result in degenerate creatures including humans. Buffon, a preeminent French naturalist took the lead in this charge, and believed that inhabitants of the new world would be smaller, weaker, and less likely to thrive because the new world was wetter and colder than the old (119). Thus, human inhabitants of the new world would feel the degenerating effects both physically and intellectually, and this degeneracy would have wide ranging political and economic implications. For example, Europeans committed to the thesis of new world degeneracy would be less likely to buy American exports of any kind, because they would be naturally deficient. Likewise, American cultural exports, including American-style democracy, were seen as naturally inferior to their European counterparts.

Jefferson, in Notes on the State of Virginia, took it as his task to fight this theory of degeneracy. In Notes, Jefferson provides detailed measurements of animals native to both the new world and the old, in an attempt to debunk Buffon's theory of degeneracy. Jefferson goes further than this, providing detailed accounts of mammoth remains found near a salt lick in Ohio, which was meant to show that the new world elephant equivalent was actually much larger and stronger (120). This shows, Jefferson thinks, that American creatures, in spite of their supposed inferior climate, are able to thrive and flourish in a
way that makes them superior to their old world counterparts. It is important to note that, for Jefferson's attack on the theory of degeneracy to succeed, he must show that some American creatures are superior to their old world equivalents. Were he to show that the indigenous peoples, and animals of the new world were merely comparable to those of Eurasia, he would have failed to prove that there was anything exceptional about America. Instead, in providing evidence that animals of the new world were superior, Jefferson could offer proponents of degeneracy solid counterexamples and, more importantly for Jefferson's political and economic goals, evidence of American exceptionalism at work in nature.

Much of the evidence of Jefferson's racism toward African Americans comes from his detailed analysis of their supposed inferiority in Notes (210). Part of Jefferson’s attack on Buffon requires that he show that the human inhabitants of the new world are superior to those of the old. If Native Americans are superior to African American slaves who have been transported to the new world, then Jefferson can debunk the degeneracy thesis, at least in respect to humans. My suggestion then, is that we place these unfortunate remarks into the historical context of an intercontinental debate about new world degeneracy. If we take these claims as part of Jefferson's attack on the theory of degeneracy, we may have, to Holowchak’s relief, reason to think that Jefferson might be less racist than his claims in Notes would lead us to believe. That is, it is plausible to think that Jefferson is actually overstating his case against the fitness of African Americans as a race in order to undermine Buffon's theory of degeneracy. We could make the case that we need to view Jefferson's racist claims in Notes as his "stacking the deck" in a debate with Europeans, and not as an accurate reflection of his thoughts on African Americans. With this, Holowchak can argue that contemporary scholars ought to remain skeptical on Jefferson's true view when it comes to the particular claims made about African Americans in Notes.

Overall, I have a favorable impression of Dutiful Correspondent, and despite a few minor shortcomings, the book is an important and useful contribution to an underdeveloped field of research. In the preface to the book, Holowchak notes that his aim in this work is to help make Jefferson respectable as a philosopher. The literature surrounding Jefferson’s philosophy is considerably barren, or else outdated. Thus, Holowchak’s project is one that is both timely and eminently worthy. Furthermore, Holowchak has done a tremendous job in researching the individual essays in this book and I have found it a valuable resource in my own research. The end notes and bibliography at the end of each chapter provide a treasure trove of resources to those looking for a hand hold in the extant literature. It is refreshing to see a scholar of Holowchak’s talents take seriously Jefferson’s philosophical contributions. I hope this is a trend that continues into the future.