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Thomas Jefferson's moral experience.

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"Our Original Barbarism": Man vs. Nature in Thomas Jefferson's Moral Experience

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**Our Original Barbarism":
Man vs. Nature in Thomas Jefferson's Moral Experience**

Maurizio Valsania

Jefferson, perhaps more than any other early democratic theorist, recognized that the development of social institutions and government could not be left to chance or to the "Laws of Nature."¹

One of the most fundamental fact about Thomas Jefferson—maybe *the* fundamental fact about Thomas Jefferson—is that he was a white man, and a landholding white man at that. Scholars of ethnicity in the last thirty years have spent an enormous amount of time analyzing what it has meant to be Indian, or African American, or Mexican American, or Asian American, but scholars of "mainstream" history have spent almost no time analyzing what it means to be "white"; whiteness, on the contrary, simply remains the norm by which the difference of the non whites is gauged. We are just beginning our exploration of whiteness, as a culturally and politically constructed phenomenon.²

This paper presents Thomas Jefferson's moral attitudes from a particular point of view.³ The thesis I defend can be stated in a very schematic way. (1) In order to secure the new-born Republic the American "leader," according to **[End Page 627]** Jefferson, must struggle against enemies, against circumstances but mainly against nature. Nature is perhaps the most powerful symbol of the disorder white Americans have to conquer. (2) This struggle against nature reveals a deep ethical commitment. White men are praiseworthy to the extent that they keep fighting against disorder, nature, and circumstances. (3) Jefferson's optimism, or better, "meliorism," was aimed at promoting moral behavior, i.e., to incite his alter egos to struggle against adverse conditions. As to whether or not he was confident about the course of American history, I have staked no claims in this paper.⁴ (4) Jefferson's case for the struggle against nature is ethically coherent and leads to some interesting reflections on Jefferson's ideas about human nature and white Americans in particular.

The notion of "human nature" in this paper refers to white Americans,

namely, to the moral character, temperament, and ambitions of those leaders whose main burden, in Jefferson's opinion, should be to construct nineteenth-century America. This examination takes for granted that Jefferson neither worked out a systematic theory of human nature nor elaborated a specific theory of the essence of white Americans.⁵ Nevertheless, it is too much to say that Jefferson "did not work out his ideas in a logical way."⁶ His anthropological views were fairly coherent even though very difficult to disentangle. Jefferson, for instance, was neither an optimist nor a pessimist. Furthermore, he was not satisfied with a philosophical, simply "general," and a priori definition of a universal human nature. Jefferson placed human beings outside a metaphysical frame of reference. He placed them "within the sphere of nature, and in so doing [he] was a true exponent of the Enlightenment."⁷ Humans are merged into geographical, social, religious, economic, in short positive contexts and conditions. They appear as conditioned beings. On the other hand Jefferson was not exclusively involved in the examination of a physical or a posteriori anthropology in which humans are considered solely in the unique particularity of their races and habits.⁸

Thomas Jefferson stood in the middle between the quest for a philosophical theory of human nature and a scientific examination of it. One thing is clear: he was not content with sweeping statements. Merle Curti noted, for example, "Jefferson's feelings about human nature's plasticity."⁹ This sense of "plasticity" suggests Jefferson's realism and complexity of vision. A philosopher and an **[End Page 628]** anthropologist, Jefferson was neither satisfied by a general definition nor by an optimistic portrait of human nature. He was against idealization, in particular when white Americans are at stake. Thus, this paper considers the terms in which Jefferson "questioned the cheery view of human nature that some enlightened thinkers celebrated."¹⁰ Must white Americans be celebrated? Must nature be celebrated?

I. Thomas Jefferson was a strong supporter of social improvement. His involvement in educational, agrarian, commercial, scientific, geographic, and political projects shows several instances of his being an

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¹Horace S. Fries, “Varieties of Freedom: An Effort Toward Orchestration,” *Freedom and Experience: Essays Presented to Horace M. Kallen*, eds. S. Hook and M. R. Konwitz (Ithaca, N.Y., 1947), 21.

²Patricia N. Limerick, “Exploring Ourselves: Jefferson, History, and the Changing West,” *Thomas Jefferson and the Changing West: From Conquest to Conservation*, ed. J. P. Ronda (Albuquerque, N.M., 1997), 187.

³See Adrienne Koch, *The Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1943; repr. Chicago, 1964); Meyer L. Burstein, *Understanding Thomas Jefferson. Studies in Economics, Law and Philosophy* (New York, 1993), 209-49; and Ari Helo and Peter Onuf, “Jefferson, Morality, and the Problem of Slavery,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 60 (2003), 583-614.



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