



Thomas Jefferson: The Reader and Writer

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[00:00:00] Tanaya Tauber: Welcome to Live at the National Constitution Center, the podcast sharing live constitutional conversations and debates hosted by The Center and personnel online. I'm Tanaya Tauber, senior director of Town Hall Programs. As part of our ongoing education on the founders and the texts that inspired them, we convened a panel of historians to discuss Thomas Jefferson's life and legacy through the lens of his own education, what he read and how those influences shaped the American idea. Andrew Browning is the author of *Schools for Statesmen: The Divergent Educations of the Constitutional Framers*. Nancy Isenberg is the T. Harry Williams professor of history at Louisiana State University and the coauthor of *Madison and Jefferson*.

[00:00:45] Tanaya Tauber: Thomas Kidd is a research professor of church history at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and the author of *Thomas Jefferson: A Biography of Spirit and Flesh*. Jeffrey Rosen, president and CEO of the National Constitution Center moderates. The program was streamed live on October 28, 2022. Enjoy the show.

[00:01:07] Jeffrey Rosen: Hello, friends. Welcome to the National Constitution Center and to today's convening of America's Town Hall. Welcome, Andrew, Nancy and Thomas. So looking forward to the conversation. And I want to begin as you teach our audience about Jefferson's intellectual influences with a letter that Jefferson wrote and would send to the sons of friends who were going to law school when he was older. He sent this to a young friend called Bernard Moore. He sent a version of this reading list to Robert Skipwith. Friends can find it online at The Founders Archive, but in this letter, he sets out a syllabus for what Bernard Moore should read starting in the morning and go into the afternoon.

[00:01:51] Jeffrey Rosen: And in particular, his recommendations about ethics and natural religion are really interesting about what Jefferson's own influences were.

[00:02:00] Jeffrey Rosen: He recommends Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, *Condorcet*. He also recommends Hutchison's *Introduction to Moral Philosophy* and Lord Kames on *Natural Religion from the Scottish Enlightenment* and then a bunch of classical sources, Cicero's *On Duties*, the most popular, Cicero book of the founding era and Cicero's *Tusculum Disputations* as well as the works of Seneca. Andrew, tell us about those books and what they can tell us about what you described in your new book as Jefferson's self-education.

[00:02:33] Andrew Browning: Oh, thank you. And it's a pleasure and a privilege to be here this morning. I think it would be useful to know what Jefferson's own contemporaries thought about the influences of one's early reading and education. So I'd like to begin by quoting William Livingston, who was a framer of the Constitution and served for a year in Congress along with Jefferson, although, because he was not an advocate of independence,

[00:03:00] Andrew Browning: he left and was replaced by the delegation led by the Princeton President John Witherspoon. But Livingston said this, he said, "Whatever principles are imbibed at a college will run through a man's future conduct and affect the society in which he is a member in proportion to his sphere of activity, especially if it is considered that even after we arrive at years of maturity, instead of entering upon the difficult and disagreeable work of examining the principles we've formerly entertained, we rather exhort ourselves in searching for arguments to maintain and support them."

[00:03:34] Andrew Browning: And I think that probably is not only a pretty good description of Jefferson's own habit, but a view that a lot of people in Jefferson's time would have would have agreed to and accepted. So when Jefferson is writing to people like Moore and also Thomas Mann Randolph and William Mumford, he wrote this similar letter three times in his life to

[00:04:00] Andrew Browning: prospective law students, I think he is, he's thinking in terms of not only preparing for a career, but preparing for life. The letter to Skipwith is a little different because Skipwith was not headed for a legal education. And I think it's interesting that in his case and only his case, Jefferson recommends translations into English of the, the classical authors which Jefferson told Priestley later on, was one of the great pleasures, and one that he thanked his early teachers for being able to read them in the original Latin and Greek.

[00:04:35] Andrew Browning: You pointed out, you certainly revealed to us when you described these authors that Jefferson's influences do seem to fall into four pretty distinct categories. The classical influences, Cicero above all, were essentially the education of any American or British gentleman in

[00:05:00] Andrew Browning: the 18th century. Jefferson probably spent the first six years or so of his education learning to read and write Latin using Cicero and a few other authors as his model and Cicero stuck with him. He never leave Cicero's name off his lists. When he was accused by Richard Henry Lee of having plagiarized The Declaration from Locke's *Second Treatise on Government*,

[00:05:26] Andrew Browning: his defense was that he actually was simply using the fundamental works that were in the air at the time. And then he says, "Those were Aristotle, Cicero, Locke and Sidney," or at least those four he mentions, which is funny because he never mentions Aristotle in any other circumstance and one thing we do know about his education at William & Mary, was that William & Mary, conservative as the school was, directed to the professors to teach the philosophy of writers

[00:06:00] Andrew Browning: such as Locke and Newton rather than Aristotle, who had been too logged in the schools.

[00:06:05] Andrew Browning: So the classical influence, the Scottish influence and I think this probably comes up mostly in the readings that George Wythe directed him to when he was studying law with Wythe, Hume, Hutcheson, Robertson's histories and Lord Kames above all, one of his favorite authors, Henry Hume, Lord Kames. Then there are the British, the Commonwealth men, as they're called, the writers and the politicians who supported the overthrow of Stuart's, and Locke and Sidney who he tends to mention in tandem and Bolingbroke were all in his letters of recommendation to students and all favored authors of his.

[00:06:50] Andrew Browning: And finally, the French authors who show up later in his career, I don't think until he'd really been to Paris, that these authors become really influential

[00:07:00] Andrew Browning: people like Condorcet, although Montesquieu was probably an early influence there too. So those four categories, those authors that, I think Jefferson thought, young men setting out in life needed to know if they were going to be effective public citizens.

[00:07:18] Jeffrey Rosen: Thank you so much for that wonderful introduction to Jefferson's thoughts, for that really helpful breaking down of the four influences the classical, Scottish, British Commonwealth and French and really looking forward to exploring similarities and differences among those influences. In your wonderful book on Jefferson's spiritual life, Thomas Kidd, you teased out the competing tugs of classical and Enlightenment influences. You ascribed the famous heart and head letter to the battle in Jefferson between Epicureanism and Christianity. Your book is so rich. Give our audience a sense of how the

[00:08:00] Jeffrey Rosen: influences we put on the table for the classical, Scottish Enlightenment, British and French influences played out in Jefferson's moral and spiritual philosophy.

[00:08:09] Thomas Kidd: Thanks for having me. You know, I think the introduction that we've already had speaks to the vast array of intellectual influences that Jefferson has. And, you know, Jefferson has become increasingly controversial in American culture these days, but it doesn't seem like anybody would deny the fact that he read an awful lot of sources and considered that a proper gentleman should devote himself to the life of the mind this way and to continue to pursue reading for enlightenment and edification throughout your adult life. And so we've seen already that he's just massively devoted to this continuing program of reading that also leads him to spend an enormous amount of money on books, which is

[00:09:00] Thomas Kidd: a vice I tend to approve of. But he does have the Epicurean influence and he often will discuss even late into life about the Epicurean influence on his philosophy.

[00:09:14] Thomas Kidd: And to him, Epicureanism, we tend to think of Epicureanism as the pursuit, just pleasure for its own good, but, for Jefferson, and in the classical Epicurean tradition,

that's more about pursuing tranquility, and sort of piece that often is attached to private living at a place like Monticello, and so that was a really important value to him. But he also has a deep Christian influences. He, is sort of heterodox in his theology and in terms of, especially as a young man, he talks about, you know, a letter to Peter Carr, his nephew, around the same time as the letter that you referenced, that we should think about

[00:10:00] Thomas Kidd: the Bible as a sort of a piece of classical literature. And that it taps at this sort of Livy had talked about miracles happening, that you probably wouldn't take it at face value, and similarly, we shouldn't read the Bible, that way.

[00:10:16] Thomas Kidd: But he's also ensconced in this traditional Anglican culture that he grows up in and he's very active in reading the New Testament in Greek throughout his adult life apparently. And he also reads, *The Septuagint*, the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, for his own personal edification and enlightenment through his adult life. He does not know Hebrew, which he and John Adams talked about whether a properly educated person should know Hebrew or not, but Jefferson actually says he thinks you can hear the voice of the Divine better in *The Septuagint* in the Greek than you can in the Hebrew,

[00:11:00] Thomas Kidd: which I'm not sure how Jefferson would know, since he can't read the Hebrew.

[00:11:04] Thomas Kidd: But anyway, you can see that those just add to this symphony of all these different sources. It's my sense that part of Jefferson's kind of moral dissonance is that he never really settled on exactly which one of these traditions is going to be the sort of ethical determinant as it were in his life. And I think that at least partly accounts for some of the dissonance, if not chaos, in his ethical personal living.

[00:11:33] Jeffrey Rosen: Fascinating. What a beautiful way to put it the symphony of different sources and claim that his ethical chaos is reflected in his personal living is made powerfully in the book. You so powerfully suggest that his devotion to the Bible is stronger than is sometimes thought and he believes, as you say, in providentialism and afterlife, but despite his unitarianism does not settle on a firm spiritual

[00:12:00] Jeffrey Rosen: philosophy and with, you argue, catastrophic ethical consequences. Nancy Isenberg, what was the consequence of the sources we've been discussing on Jefferson's famous statement in the Declaration of Independence that all men are created equal and are endowed by their creator with unalienable rights including those to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness?

[00:12:20] Nancy Isenberg: Well, first, I'd like to say, we have to remember that Jefferson owed a lot of books, 7,000 that he would sell to the Library of Congress in 1815 and 1816 and then he bought a new library. So I very much see him as a man, a work in progress. His ideas really do change over the time, as he reads, as he explores new areas, but yes, I think I agree with Andrew Browning that he can be stubborn, and often wants to defend his ideas. He's not always

generous to people who disagree with him. But when we get to the Declaration of Independence, I think one of the things we also have to realize

[00:13:00] Nancy Isenberg: about Jefferson, and that's why people who looked at his *Commonplace Book*, we have to also remember how did he acquire his knowledge.

[00:13:08] Nancy Isenberg: And a *Commonplace Book* is about collecting excerpts, verses, and there's an interesting way that I think we need to understand Jefferson in that, in many ways, he has a poetic, a poet sensibility. He listened to the sound of words. He cared about that. That's why his letters are these crafted masterpieces. It's not like today where people get on the internet and just type. He was very conscious of words, their sounds, their order, and capturing that rhetorical and poetic impact. And when we get to the Declaration of Independence, I strongly suggest that everyone read Jefferson's original rough draft because there you

[00:14:00] Nancy Isenberg: really see the importance of his words. And I'm gonna just read a few lines, such as, "These facts have given the last stab of agonizing affection. Mainly spirit bids us to renounce forever these unfeeling brethren. It becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the bands which have connected them to another."

[00:14:27] Nancy Isenberg: He talked about the patient sufferance of the colonies. And here's the real incredibly powerful line, "We must endeavor to forget our former love." Now, what is he talking about here? Well, he's actually treating the Declaration of Independence as a divorce decree. And we know this because just a few years earlier in 1772, when he was a practicing attorney, he made a list of the pros and cons of divorce. And here, we see the influence of David Hume. What does he take from David

[00:15:00] Nancy Isenberg: Hume? Very key argument, he said, "It was cruel to continue by violence. A union made at first by mutual love, but now dissolved by hatred." That's essentially what he's saying when he's talking and justifying the right of rebellion, the right to sever that tie.

[00:15:19] Nancy Isenberg: In addition to Hume, he also refers to Montesquieu. And what's crucial, this is why, you know, scholars have pondered for many years, why is it that he changed John Locke's famous triad of life, liberty, and property to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness? Well, in his list of pros and cons, he basically said, happiness is the reason marriage existed at all. So what I'm trying to suggest is that Jefferson's way of thinking and the way in which he uses language and every word that he puts on the page, he's very aware of its impact. And the Declaration, what he was doing was extremely

[00:16:00] Nancy Isenberg: important, he was rejecting the older model, which assumed that Great Britain or the king was a father, and the colonists were children. This was a common metaphor, the family metaphor. He's changing the family metaphor to create it into a more equal relationship, one based on consent.

[00:16:21] Nancy Isenberg: And I think if you pay attention to his words and the richness of his words and we realize that Jefferson takes and borrows from different elements, whether it's something not just directly from David Hume, but David Hume through the filter of how he was applying it to thinking about divorce. And it's the one area of Jefferson's expertise in the law, people went to him to talk to him about questions relating to marriage and divorce because he was not, you know, the law was not his major focus. So I think that borrowing and that way of thinking about

[00:17:00] Nancy Isenberg: his language is also essential for understanding Jefferson.

[00:17:05] Jeffrey Rosen: Wonderful. Such a rich intervention about Jefferson's poetic influences, the importance of his *Commonplace Book* and that really illuminating parsing of his writings about divorce to understand his idea about the pursuit of happiness. I would love to take a round because I know I'll all learn so much from you, to ask you, Andrew Browning, to delve in about the relation between all of the intellectual influences we've been discussing on the Declaration. The phrase, "The pursuit of happiness," comes not from John Locke's *Second Treatise* which talks about life, liberty and property, but from John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* where Locke says that a constant determination to a pursuit of happiness is no abridgement of liberty.

[00:17:50] Jeffrey Rosen: And we put on the table a, a bunch of different influences that, Andrew Browning, you discuss in your book so well, from the Scottish Enlightenment folks to the English Whigs, to the

[00:18:00] Jeffrey Rosen: classical people. Jefferson read all of them. He recorded them in his *Commonplace Book* and the other founders read them too, the other people at the Continental Congress. So, Andrew Browning, how would you discuss these competing intellectual influences we've been describing on Jefferson and how they're reflected in the Declaration?

[00:18:16] Andrew Browning: Well, they, they are in a sense competing. I mean Locke and Hume would have disagreed on far more things than they agreed on. But I think it's interesting that Jefferson was always looking for different kinds of support for the principles that he'd already absorbed. Thomas Kidd talks about the Epicureanism, that is such a large element of Jefferson's value system. I think that's the pursuit of happiness, what he's talking about, not just the idea that we can pursue, what the French called le bonheur. I think a lot of his later writing about happiness is

[00:19:00] Andrew Browning: influenced by French thinkers, but the notion that the pursuit of happiness is what Jefferson was always after. And that's the Epicureanism, I think that we heard about earlier.

[00:19:10] Andrew Browning: Locke to many modern readers, means the Two Treatises on Government, but in Jefferson's time, the *Essay on Human Understanding* was a far more influential, far better known document. I think that's one of the sources of the idea that all men

are created equal, is Locke's argument that we are all born as a tabula rasa and the only thing that's going to distinguish the great from the lesser great is going to be the influences that mold their lives, the writing on that tabula rasa. With Jefferson and his different authors that he read, he's not really systematic about trying to make sure that all of his uses of these authors are consistent, but he chooses those elements of them that

[00:20:00] Andrew Browning: really strike a chord with him.

[00:20:01] Andrew Browning: Nancy Isenberg talks about his belief in the right of revolution, being associated with his arguments about the nature of divorce as a lawyer. And I think he found those connections and they made sense to him. He seized on them because they reinforced what he already wanted to think. I noticed in his *Commonplace Book*, his legal *Commonplace Book*, the one that he took notes in when he was studying law, he records a great deal of the history of the Anglo-Saxons. And it's interesting that when he was planning the curriculum for the University of Virginia, his own ideal college, he didn't really want to include Hebrew as a required language, but he really wanted to have Anglo-Saxon taught by the university.

[00:20:57] Andrew Browning: And I think the reason there is that he was

[00:21:00] Andrew Browning: convinced that the career of the Anglo-Saxon tribes and leaving Germany and coming to England and therefore giving up their identity as Germans was the model of what the American colonists had done in leaving England, giving up their identity as Englishmen, and becoming a new people. So, you know, that's very different from the idea that he's talking about a divorce, but both of those lines of thinking lead him to the same conviction and that is that the American people do have a right to separate from England. He finds that in Francis Hutchison and his arguments for the right for rebellion, that's one more reinforcement.

[00:21:46] Andrew Browning: So he looks to many different sources, but it's not that he's trying to find what those sources have to say. I think he's gathering together, synthesizing, the different elements of them, that

[00:22:00] Andrew Browning: all focus on what he believes and what he wants people to believe.

[00:22:05] Jeffrey Rosen: That idea of him as an eclectic thinker who synthesizes the common elements of these philosophers is so powerful and true. And I want to ask you about the pursuit of happiness, and in particular, an author who appears a lot in the commonplace, in his literary *Commonplace Book* is Cicero. And I was so struck when Jefferson's father died, Jefferson copied passages from Cicero's *Tusculum Disputations* to console himself. And when he was written to by law students, and later in life, and asked to define the pursuit of happiness, he would often give an example from Cicero as well. So let me ask you, Thomas Kidd, what was the influence of Cicero and his vision of the pursuit of happiness and all of the thinkers on that letter that he recommended to Bernard Moore, Aristotle,

[00:23:00] Jeffrey Rosen: Cicero, Locke, Kames, all of them view the pursuit of happiness as obtained by the pursuit of virtue, of being good rather than feeling good. Tell us about how they influenced Jefferson's vision in the pursuit of happiness.

[00:23:12] Thomas Kidd: Well, I think that there's multiple impulses there, even within the classical tradition. I mean part of what he's drawing on there is the Republican ideal, small Republican ideal of the independent farmer, and the life of tranquility where you're left alone to enjoy books, and family, and wine. That's a powerful ideal within that kind of Roman Republican tradition that he's drawing on. And I think that that's, again, part of what he's trying to manifest at Monticello and then when Monticello gets too busy, he built another mansion even farther away at Poplar Forest. And so there is that ideal of the pursuit of happiness

[00:24:00] Thomas Kidd: as private tranquility, but as you suggested, there's also within the Republican and Christian traditions the idea that there is no happiness through just the pursuit of self-interest and pleasure, but that virtue is a path to happiness, if not the path to happiness.

[00:24:19] Thomas Kidd: And I think that Jefferson is ambivalent about this. I mean he certainly knows that tradition of Republican and Christian virtue, but he doesn't ever seem to really embrace the idea philosophically that God has designed a way for us to live that will lead to happiness. I think he tends to see these matters in a more individualistic sort of light that it would be too strong to say sort of, "Do your own thing." But there, I think he does idealize that being left alone in your private world to sort of make that world what you

[00:25:00] Thomas Kidd: want to. And, of course, one of the great problems with that we struggle with now, is that whole private world that he's envisioning is deeply dependent on the subservience of other people to allow you to pursue happiness. That sort of deeply depends on the idea that other people are not free to pursue their happiness.

[00:25:22] Thomas Kidd: And that's just a dilemma that I think Jefferson never really sorted out. And so this is again where you can see, is the Christian mandate of sacrificial love for your neighbor, is that the controlling virtue or is it the tranquility and pleasure of home and family life and consuming good wine and those sorts of things? I just don't think he ever completely sorts it out.

[00:25:49] Jeffrey Rosen: So interesting. Nancy Isenberg, you talked about the roots of Jefferson's idea of the pursuit of happiness and divorce law. Tell us how you think he understood the idea of the pursuit of

[00:26:00] Jeffrey Rosen: happiness. Thomas Kidd just identified these competing notions, the Christian and stoic, a Republican idea of virtue as caring for others and self-sacrifice versus the Epicurean focus on tranquility. But it's striking that all of the sources on Jefferson's reading list, the Scottish Enlightenment sources as well as the classical ones, contain the phrase the pursuit of happiness. I was blown away when I read them and found that the phrase actually appears. So obviously, these different traditions use the phrase pursuit of happiness, but understood it in

different ways. How would you describe the competing visions of the pursuit of happiness and how do you think Jefferson understood it?

[00:26:36] Nancy Isenberg: Yeah, I think we have to remember, and this is where the historian comes into play, that clearly there's plenty of evidence to show that he was interested in Epicureanism. But that's premised on the idea and many who saw Jefferson, many who visited him at Monticello remarked that he's very much carries himself as an aristocrat. Because to

[00:27:00] Nancy Isenberg: have those pleasures, to have wine, and as we know he went deeply into debt, to have taste, the whole idea of aesthetics of taste was rooted in the way in which he constructed an aristocratic identity. And this was quite common in Virginia. Most Virginians liked to dress down. I made a joke in my class the other day, it's like Google execs, you know, they were wearing blue jeans and Jefferson would kind of later adopt that when he's president.

[00:27:28] Nancy Isenberg: You know, he wouldn't, after his inauguration, he returned to the White House on his horse. He wouldn't go in a fancy carriage. John Marshall also did not wear expensive clothing, and Jefferson wore very expensive clothing when he's in France. It's like Franklin when he changes his wig, when he leaves England and then goes to France. There is a way in which Jefferson is conflicted, but he very much, throughout his life, when he's

[00:28:00] Nancy Isenberg: constructing his tranquil permanent felicity at Monticello, it's not only totally dependent on his aristocratic privileges, but it's also very much as the late Jan Lewis wrote about, it's about his family and the way in which

[00:28:16] Nancy Isenberg: Even John Locke, John Locke did not embrace equality for everyone. The Two Treatises is premised on the idea that the family, the private sphere, is of a different order, and he did not accept the idea that women were equal. And I think we have to see that in Jefferson as well. In the same way, he is more than willing, as the master of Monticello, to accept and be dependent on the work of slaves. And, you know, he drew a distinction, he drew a distinction between the cultivator which was a higher more noble, and this, he draws on the long tradition of husbandry from English sources, versus the

[00:29:00] Nancy Isenberg: slave who never reaches that status, and in a sense is sort of seen more as not only the, you know, building his freedom on the unfreedom of others, which was widely recognized and discussed in 18th century by Franklin and many others, but the idea that we have to accept that Jefferson still retained the idea that people are born to certain stations.

[00:29:26] Nancy Isenberg: So this is what makes him so complicated. The pursuit of happiness has its limits because some people are simply not going to have the same luxuries and privileges as a Southern White male planter. It's just not going to happen. And Jefferson, in no way, imagined that he wanted it to happen. So we have to kind of put him in the context of the way he actually lived as well as distinguishing that from the sources that he read. I definitely agree with Browning that he selectively chooses what he wants to read, when he wants to read it.

[00:30:00] Nancy Isenberg: But the domestic sphere and the way in which he imagined happiness is intimately tied to the way he thought of family, his first marriage, the way in which the kingdom on the mountain, very much the manor estate, is very much the center. I mean, when he's in the White House, he's constantly complaining to Madison, "I want to return to Virginia. I want to return to Monticello." So he creates it as this ideal, this idyllic place, this Eden. So happiness is, is deeply rooted in the way he thinks of family, the way he thinks of the world that he's constructing as the architectural historians have gone into great detail about Monticello, creating. And if you go to Monticello, you realize that his bedroom and Jefferson's room is at the center of the universe at Monticello and others are the satellites.

[00:30:55] Jeffrey Rosen: You're so right that going physically to Monticello and

[00:31:00] Jeffrey Rosen: standing in that room, feeling how he constructed the entire palace as a sort of an Eden for his own utopian visions is so true. Well, we have several questions about how Jefferson reconciled his writings and public life with his private life as Fred Duggan puts it. We have a question about the degree to which Stephen Laparros asks in what sense might we today including those perhaps with a Christian biblical worldview understand Jefferson's created equal. So, Andrew Browning, to what degree did Jefferson's philosophical readings and commitments influence or not his complicated, arguably hypocritical views about slavery?

[00:31:42] Andrew Browning: I think to understand Jefferson and to try to find a coherent answer to that question, you have to see him as a theorist, an idealist. Nancy Isenberg has done a wonderful job in her book about Jefferson and

[00:32:00] Andrew Browning: Madison and looking at the relationship between the two of them and Madison, in many ways, was the one who was trying to make Jefferson face reality. And Jefferson was always heading off into a theoretical ideal and Madison, you had to kind of grit his teeth, he knew that was not going to work. But Jefferson was always trying to work out his ideal, and at Monticello, he never finished Monticello. He moved his wife in there, and they lived essentially in a tent while he was building and rebuilding Monticello.

[00:32:39] Andrew Browning: Jefferson never achieved his perfection. He never achieved and you can't achieve perfection, he understood. The pursuit of happiness is the thing that all people are entitled to. The achievement of happiness is probably impossible for anybody and certainly was for Jefferson.

[00:33:00] Andrew Browning: So when you think of Jefferson, you know, spending money on wine, but winding up in debt to the point that his estate could not carry out his goal of manumitting his slaves because they were assets that had to be balanced off against the liabilities that his estate had, and the debts that he had run up, Jefferson could put on his blinders. And if he was pursuing an ideal where it was the perfect place to live or the perfect style of eating dinner or the ideal political structure, sometimes the practicalities got brushed aside and sometimes those practicalities were very important practicalities like people's lives and freedom.

[00:33:47] Andrew Browning: So I think if we see Jefferson as a not very practical, but deeply committed idealist, we understand him a little bit better. And I think that was what Madison

[00:34:00] Andrew Browning: had to live with and that partnership.

[00:34:02] Jeffrey Rosen: Very well put. Jefferson put on his blinders, and we see him as a not very practical idealist, seems like a powerful way of capturing him. Thomas Kidd, in your book, *Thomas Jefferson: A Biography of Spirit and Flesh*, you powerfully point out these inconsistencies between his public theoretical commitments and his private life. Ranging from the great debt, he went into to his hitting on the wife of a friend, John Walker, to his relationship with Sally Hemings. Relationship is not the right word to his abusives of Sally Hemings, who he enslaved. Tell us about that clash which you explored so powerful in your book and how did Jefferson reconcile it in his own mind?

[00:34:44] Thomas Kidd: Right. I mean I don't think he did reconcile a lot of these things. I mean we've talked about the debt problem and that is, in a way, the biggest point that Jefferson struggled with himself, is that he was constantly touting

[00:35:00] Thomas Kidd: the virtue of frugality and economic independence, and he was the exact opposite of that in his personal life and I think he was somewhat humiliated by it. But as Nancy Isenberg said, I think you do have to understand him as an aristocrat, and for me, the probably the controlling, ethical standard for him was the mandates of living as a Virginia gentleman.

[00:35:30] Thomas Kidd: And so he just simply could not stand the idea that he would not present himself in a genteel way to guests, for instance. He could not stand the idea that when a gentleman friend or relative came to him for a loan, that he wouldn't sign the loan. And that was really, he called it the coup de grâce, then in late 1818, he cosigned a massive loan for one of his relatives and political allies and then the

[00:36:00] Thomas Kidd: panic of 1819 he had, and then the guy died. So Jefferson was totally sunk at that point. And you just think he's been moaning about how bad his finances are for years and years and then he goes off and does this utterly foolish thing. And you just think, "How could this possibly be?"

[00:36:20] Thomas Kidd: I mean we spend more time rightly on the hypocrisy over slavery, but I think on that issue, Jefferson had at least the way that he explained the contradiction to himself, which was that "I will be ready to support gradual emancipation when there's political will for it in Virginia, or in the nation." His signing of the ban on future slave imports in 1807 and '08 is probably an example of that there was something to that. But he professed in notes on the state of Virginia and other

[00:37:00] Thomas Kidd: places early on in his political career, that slavery was immoral and that it was bad for slaves, and it was bad for the owners and all this.

[00:37:08] Thomas Kidd: But certainly, as Andrew Browning said, his economic situation and after 1806, it becomes more legally difficult to do anything about manumission too, but it's especially his economic situation, financial situation, that's never been to allow him personally to do anything other than let some of his, almost certainly children with Sally Hemings, to run away and then he frees a couple more of them in his will and some of his slaves that he's particularly close to, he lets go, but 100 plus more of his slaves have to be auctioned off because the creditors are at the door.

[00:37:48] Jeffrey Rosen: That's such a powerful explanation ultimately for his hypocrisy, as you say that his incredible indebtedness didn't allow him to live his ideals and therefore he was hypocritical at the end of his life.

[00:38:00] Jeffrey Rosen: Nancy Isenberg, Jefferson did lament avarice, which was a classical sin, both as the reason that other enslavers refused to support the end of slavery. He criticized South Carolina and Georgia for refusing to ban the international slave trade because of their avarice and was quick to detect avarice in others but not in himself. To what degree does that explain much of his hypocrisy and how self-aware was he of his own greed and avarice?

[00:38:29] Nancy Isenberg: Well, Jefferson at times imagined himself as a moralist. When he decides to cut and paste the Gospels and tell until the importance of what Jesus can teach you from the Bible and eliminates the things that he thinks are either superstition or distractions. It's very much almost like Aesop's Fables. He's taking the key elements, the key virtues that Jesus's teachings can offer and one of them, and

[00:39:00] Nancy Isenberg: Jefferson himself does not adhere to them, like, humility, tolerance, generosity. These themes are for him, qualities again that were associated with his version of gentility. But there are also, I think, we have to realize that, as we said, I think it was Andrew Browning was saying we were talking about him being an idealist, or that you're pursuing a certain moral sensibility, which was very important to him and how he carried himself.

[00:39:30] Nancy Isenberg: But Jefferson is also very much a man of the 18th century. So the highest ideal was equilibrium—was to not to go too extreme. So he's constantly railing against the Federalists and sees them as effeminate and overly emotional. And this returns us to another important way Jefferson looked at the world and I think he's very much grounded in a kind of materialism, the human body. This is where Jefferson is a scientist and he's borrowing from 18th century science.

[00:40:00] Nancy Isenberg: And he also believes very much in environmentalism, that people are creatures of the land, creatures of the soil.

[00:40:07] Nancy Isenberg: And he believes that, not only if we think about Locke and the importance of human experience and the collection of knowledge over a lifetime, how that makes the human, Jefferson also believes in his idealistic way, that the body plays a part in defining who you are as a thinker. John Locke advised that elite gentlemen should not spend all

their days sitting in a chair or reading, that they needed to get out and get some exercise. And Jefferson subscribed to these rules of health. I mean, getting up every day and bathing his feet and making sure he went out for a horseback ride on his horse to get his exercise because that's the way gentlemen got their exercise.

[00:40:54] Nancy Isenberg: So there's an interesting thing, I mean even if we think about the head and the heart, the body's there too.

[00:41:00] Nancy Isenberg: Jefferson read all the latest medical theories. Those theories influenced the way he looks at how the body functions, and that's going to affect your moral behavior. Those two things are not disconnected. And I think that's another way for us to recover the real Jefferson, the way in which, he even was influenced by Swiss thinker, Tissot, about sexuality, sexual behavior. So he thought about and that's something we often never talk about with the founders. Again, I made a joke to my students the other day about if you read some old studies, you'll see that the founders never had sex. Well, of course, they did. They were human beings, they did things.

[00:41:43] Nancy Isenberg: And the question of Sally Hemings, we have to put this in the context that he certainly was not the only Southern planter who had a relationship with a slave. And it's even more complicated because Sally Hemings is a relative. She's a half-sister of his wife. And this is

[00:42:00] Nancy Isenberg: the other dark side of Jefferson that he deeply adopted this idea of understanding race and understanding human capabilities through the idea of pedigree and inheritance. And many times he compares human pedigree to the way he was raising sheep in a very famous letter. And he also, very much in that way, in his notes on the state of Virginia, where he's kind of arguing against the French thinker, Buffon, and arguing that the United States is not one big degenerate swamp where animals are shrinking and the human potential is being stifled.

[00:42:42] Nancy Isenberg: But he still accepted the idea that human behavior can follow the path of regency or degeneracy, and pedigree and inheritance very much rooted in the English aristocrat as well, was very much a part of his thinking and shaped how we thought about race as well.

[00:43:00] Jeffrey Rosen: So interesting. Such a fascinating reminder from Locke about Jefferson's emphasis on exercise and his tending to the body and also putting the experience with Sally Hemings in that broader context. So many great questions. I want to just note a question about whether Jefferson was introduced to Eastern philosophy. And it's so striking that in his correspondence with Adams, Adams is reading Joseph Priestley on the Bhagavad Gita, and wants to trace back the essence of morality from Pythagoras to the Indians and Jefferson excitedly tells him that Priestley completed the book before he dies and says he'll send it to him. So there was a deep interest in comparative religion.

[00:43:44] Jeffrey Rosen: I think we'll have time for one more round and, Andrew Browning, I would love for you to put on the table the thesis of your really important and exciting new book about the education of the founders. This is *Schools for Statesmen: The Divergent Education of the Constitutional Framers*.

[00:44:00] Jeffrey Rosen: You identify three categories of framers that self-educated, those who were educated at the older universities, Harvard, Yale and William & Mary, and those at the newer ones including Penn and Princeton and talk about how the exposure to the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers at the newer universities created a different vision of governments than the kind of separation of powers emphasis that resulted at Harvard and Yale for the study of the classics. It's a big but important thesis. Share it with our friends.

[00:44:27] Andrew Browning: Okay, well, that is several 100 pages to really explain and defend that. But Jefferson almost falls in all three of those categories at once, because he did attend one of the most traditional of the American colleges, William & Mary, for two years. No one graduated from William & Mary. When he went to William & Mary for a couple of years, got to meet all the other Virginia gentlemen and read a little bit. And in Jefferson's case, he was very

[00:45:00] Andrew Browning: fortunate that William Small was there for the two years that he was there. Because Small was an exception, he was the only layman on the faculty who was not an Anglican minister, and he was himself a product of the Scottish Enlightenment.

[00:45:15] Andrew Browning: Thomas Reid's mentor was John Gregory, was also his mentor at Aberdeen. And all of these influences really do converge on Jefferson. The traditional American colleges, the, the Harvards, Yales, William & Mary, were very traditional in their curriculum. They focused almost exclusively on the classics. If you went to Yale, you would spend four years reading Greek and Latin authors and Puritan theology and your last year, you'd get a little science in there as well, but you would not read any modern history. You would not read any political philosophers, period. The only

[00:46:00] Andrew Browning: political instruction you would get would be the lectures of Thomas Clap, the president of Yale, who was himself an extremely conservative individual.

[00:46:07] Andrew Browning: At the newer schools, which were led by a Scotsman, William Smith, who was eventually president of the University of Pennsylvania, which was then College of Philadelphia, or the most influential probably of all of these people, John Witherspoon, the president of Princeton, they were themselves Scotsmen who were educated at Enlightenment colleges at Edinburgh, at Glasgow, or at Aberdeen. And the wonderful thing about Witherspoon was that he was an evangelical Presbyterian, but he taught the political philosophy of people whose theology he thought was anathema, but he believed their political philosophy was pretty reasonable. So you

[00:47:00] Andrew Browning: couldn't ignore it simply because he disagreed with their theology.

[00:47:04] Andrew Browning: And he had students who were not all Presbyterians, people like Madison or some Quakers, who would not have been admitted to Harvard or Yale. And then, of course, the self-educated and because of his lifetime commitment to education, Jefferson really falls into that category, whose sources were really eclectic. If they could read Latin, they read the classics. Benjamin Franklin couldn't read Latin until late in life. It was the last language he learned after four or five others. So he focused much more on the British. Franklin was also too early for the Scottish Enlightenment, people like Hume and Adam Smith hadn't written yet when Franklin was educating himself.

[00:47:52] Andrew Browning: So if they were exposed to the Scots, as Jefferson was, and he

[00:48:00] Andrew Browning: recommended more Scottish political thinkers, Kames, Hume Hutchison, the historian Robertson, Adam Smith, later in life after he got a chance to read *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *Wealth of Nations*, they were looking at a different notion of how to govern from the classics. They didn't depend on virtue. They understood that people, they're Presbyterians or Calvinists. They knew that virtue was not likely to be prevalent in human beings. So they looked for practical ways to balance different vices in different people in order to prevent any one small faction or any one group from imposing itself on the others.

[00:48:46] Andrew Browning: And I think we see this in Jefferson's embrace of religious—more than tolerance but—religious freedom in Virginia, the idea of not letting any one group dominate over the others, but

[00:49:00] Andrew Browning: balancing competing interests. And that's very much, I think, a contribution to the Scottish Enlightenment.

[00:49:06] Jeffrey Rosen: Such an important thesis. Thank you so much for sharing at this crucial shift between those classical thinkers who focus more on virtues and the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers who wanted instead to balance vices to ensure that none can prevail. So well put and so well defended in your book. Thomas Kidd, for your last intervention, sum up if you will for our audience the rich threads and thesis of your new book, *Thomas Jefferson: A Biography of Spirit and Flesh*. What can we learn about Jefferson's personal and spiritual life from all that he read and from his education?

[00:49:47] Thomas Kidd: Well, some of them we've already alluded to just that there are all these different competing ethical and philosophical traditions sort of ricocheting around in his brain and that I think he really

[00:50:00] Thomas Kidd: struggles to forge this into a coherent ethical system. And even obviously, lots of people with coherent ethical systems don't live up to them, but I do think that influences the sort of this kind of quality of Jefferson's life that he seems on several important

issues not to live necessarily in accord with what he says he believes. Probably the major part that we haven't, unpacked yet is just his views on religion and Christianity itself.

[00:50:34] Thomas Kidd: As Professor Isenberg said, you know, he's famous for this kind of cut and paste edition of the Gospels, the so called Jefferson Bible. It's just the Gospels, and he does two different versions of it across about 15 years, but it's fascinating to me that he, I think, goes for much of his adult life, maybe not even considering himself a Christian at all,

[00:51:00] Thomas Kidd: but he is stung by the charges in the 1800 on election, that he's an atheist. He's not an atheist, but he's called an atheist all the time by the Federalist. And then in 1802, you have the first publication of the charges about his relationship with Sally Hemings. And I think he's diligent about never addressing that publicly, but I think he's humiliated that this has gone public and terrified about what his daughters in particular are going to think about him.

[00:51:34] Thomas Kidd: Then he starts reading Joseph Priestley, who we've alluded to before and he realizes that there is what he considers an intellectually responsible way to be an ethical but materialistic Christian. So that is what leads him to produce the first version. Tragically, we don't have the text of the first version of the Jefferson Bible, but

[00:52:00] Thomas Kidd: we assume that it's something like what the second text was which is what he did in the late eighteens, which is this almost purely ethical version of Christianity. But he doesn't ever seem to have a way of kind of applying this to his life. I wish that he would have done what Franklin did. Franklin famously has his list of virtues that he would sort of check off every day, "Have I been humble?"

[00:52:30] Thomas Kidd: So, I wish Jefferson would have done something like that because it's very hard to tell what difference he thinks that Jesus's ethics make in his own day-to-day life. But he sure comes to believe that they're important and that, unlike earlier when he thought that Jesus was just kind of one of the great moral teachers of antiquity, I think he does settle on the idea that Jesus was the greatest ethical teacher of

[00:53:00] Thomas Kidd: antiquity, because of his ethic of sacrificial neighborly love.

[00:53:05] Jeffrey Rosen: So interesting and so true that he never applied these virtues in his life in a consistent way. He does have that list of 12 virtues that he sent to his daughters, I think, about thinking twice and cooling down and so forth, but you're quite right that he didn't apply to think about it systematically in your book, so powerfully shows those contradictions in his personal and philosophical life and it's just a really important contribution that I urge all of our friends to read. Nancy Isenberg, last word in this great discussion to you. I'll let you sum up in whatever ways you think best about what we can learn about Jefferson's moral and political philosophy from his education.

[00:53:46] Nancy Isenberg: Well, I think since we're on religion, I'm going to quote a letter that Jefferson wrote to William Short, who served as his friend. He was a friend and his private secretary during

[00:54:00] Nancy Isenberg: his years in France and this is 1920. He goes, "Among the sayings and discourses imputed to Jesus by his biographers," and notice he says biographers, again humanizing him, "I find many passages of fine imagination, correct morality and of the most lovely benevolence," and I think that is the key thing, the benevolence. "And others again have so much ignorance, so much absurdity, so much untruth, charlatanism and imposture as to pronounce it impossible, that such contradictions should have proceeded from the same being."

[00:54:36] Nancy Isenberg: Now, I think we can accept that this is something that today's philosophers accept about humans today—that we are riddled with contradictions. So that statement, why he is talking about the historical Jesus who he very much saw as this valuable moral teacher, but also the idea

[00:55:00] Nancy Isenberg: that, which I like about Jefferson, is he realizes that everything that happens in the past is going to get retold, confused and when he talked about twistifications of the law, the same thing exactly applies to religion. That even these texts and that's why I think he wants to read everything in the original, to sort of go back and he kind of fits into the mold of a primitive Christian, go back to the original basic truths unadorned by the eccentric additions that accumulate over time.

[00:55:37] Nancy Isenberg: This is why Jefferson is interesting, because in many ways, he also wears the hat of the historian and he wants to kind of find the truth and that means going to the primary sources, not reading the secondary interpretations. I think his relationship with religion gets more complicated because like every person,

[00:56:00] Nancy Isenberg: particularly when he's in retirement and he's imagining his own death, and he sees other people dying, there's that struggle of trying to figure out, "Well, is there an afterlife? Is there something beyond this." And he kind of wavers back and forth, but it's natural because this is the human condition, and this is something that Jefferson returned to again and again. And yes, does not have a coherent moral theory that he essentially subscribed to in his daily activities.

[00:56:31] Nancy Isenberg: And in that way, taking Jefferson off the pedestal, we have to understand that he embodies the same kind of contradictions that we as people have in our lives. When people look at us, if they even bother, a hundred years from now, they will also note the hypocrisies, the contradictions, because that is, unfortunately, I've been reading a lot of Mark Twain recently, you know, and he talks about how the human being is the only one who knows the difference between right and

[00:57:00] Nancy Isenberg: wrong and tends to take the wrong choice. And I think that's kind of where we have to understand Jefferson as well.

[00:57:09] Jeffrey Rosen: Powerfully put. A wonderful note to end on. You're so right that in addition to providing a model for emulation, as the founders thought the classics could do for all of us, the founders themselves hold up a mirror to our own limitations, inconsistencies and hypocrisies, and for that reason, worth studying. And you're also so right to call attention to the urgent importance of studying primary sources that were twistifications that Jefferson used to impugn his rival, John Marshall, did motivate his determination to study the primary sources.

[00:57:39] Jeffrey Rosen: And that's why friends who are watching the National Constitution Center has put up many of the primary sources we've been describing and discussing on our new Founders Library. And you can click on the new historic documents library and read Cicero's *Tusculum Disputations*, read Cicero's *On Duties* as well as the other sources that we've been discussing in this

[00:58:00] Jeffrey Rosen: wonderful conversation. It has been a privilege to talk about Jefferson with all of you, dear friends, and please let me give the most heartfelt thanks to Andrew Browning, Thomas Kidd and Nancy Isenberg for a wonderful discussion. Andrew, Thomas, Nancy, thank you so much for joining. Thank you, friends, for taking time in the middle of your day to learn and grow together. I look forward to seeing everyone again soon. Thank you. Bye, everyone.

[00:58:27] Tanaya Tauber: Today's show was produced by John Guerra, Lana Ulrich, Sam Desai, Melody Raul, and me. It was engineered by Dave Stott of the NCC's wonderful AV team. Research was provided by Emily Campbell. For a list of resources mentioned throughout this episode, visit constitutioncenter.org/debate. While you're there, check out our upcoming shows and register to join us virtually. You can join us via Zoom, watch our live YouTube stream or watch the videos later in our media library at [constitution](https://constitutioncenter.org/media-library)

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