
Thomas Jefferson on the African Race

1781

Excerpted from *Notes on the State of Virginia*

Thomas Jefferson's only book, Notes on the State of Virginia, was primarily written in 1781 and first published privately in 1784. The following discussion of the African race came after a description of failed legislation in Virginia that would have eventually emancipated young, enslaved African Americans. Although Jefferson favored this limited policy of emancipation, he strongly believed that the freed slaves would have to migrate out of Virginia, not only because of hostility between whites and blacks but also because of important differences that he perceived between the two races. Jefferson made clear that he believed that blacks were inferior to whites. It is worth remembering, however, that in the original draft of the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson decried slavery as a "cruel war against human nature itself," which violated "sacred rights of life and liberty." In other words, the evidence suggests that Jefferson believed that God created Africans with the same "inalienable rights" as deserved by whites. Nevertheless, he emancipated only a small number of his many slaves. —D. Voelker

[1] The first difference [between whites and blacks] which strikes us is that of color. . . . The difference is fixed in nature, and is as real as if its seat and cause were better known to us. And is this difference of no importance? Is it not the foundation of a greater or less share of beauty in the two races? Are not the fine mixtures of red and white, the expressions of every passion by greater or less suffusions of color in the one, preferable to that eternal monotony, which reigns in the countenances, that immoveable veil of black which covers all the emotions of the other race? Add to these, flowing hair, a more elegant symmetry of form, their own judgment in favor of the whites, declared by their preference of them, as uniformly as is the preference of the orangutan for the black women over those of his own species. The circumstance of superior beauty, is thought worthy attention in the propagation of our horses, dogs, and other domestic animals; why not in that of man? . . .

[2] They seem to require less sleep. A black, after hard labor through the day, will be induced by the slightest amusements to sit up till midnight, or later, though knowing he must be out with the first dawn of the morning. They are at least as brave, and more adventuresome. But this may perhaps proceed from a want of forethought, which prevents their seeing a danger till it be present. When present, they do not go through it with more coolness or steadiness than the whites. They are more ardent after their female: but love seems with them to be more an eager desire, than a tender delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation. Their griefs are transient. Those numberless afflictions, which render it doubtful whether heaven has given life to us in mercy or in wrath, are less felt, and sooner forgotten with them. In general, their existence appears to participate more of sensation than reflection. . . .

[3] Comparing them by their faculties of memory, reason, and imagination, it appears to me, that in memory they are equal to the whites; in reason much inferior, as I think one [black] could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid; and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous. It would be unfair to follow them to Africa for this investigation. We will consider them here, on the same stage with the whites, and where

the facts are not apocryphal on which a judgment is to be formed. It will be right to make great allowances for the difference of condition, of education, of conversation, of the sphere in which they move. Many millions of them have been brought to, and born in America. Most of them indeed have been confined to tillage, to their own homes, and their own society: yet many have been so situated, that they might have availed themselves of the conversation of their masters; many have been brought up to the handicraft arts, and from that circumstance have always been associated with the whites. Some have been liberally educated, and all have lived in countries where the arts and sciences are cultivated to a considerable degree, and have had before their eyes samples of the best works from abroad. The Indians, with no advantages of this kind, will often carve figures on their pipes not destitute of design and merit. They will crayon out an animal, a plant, or a country, so as to prove the existence of a germ in their minds which only wants cultivation. They astonish you with strokes of the most sublime oratory; such as prove their reason and sentiment strong, their imagination glowing and elevated. But never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration; never see even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture. In music they are more generally gifted than the whites with accurate ears for tune and time Whether they will be equal to the composition of a more extensive run of melody, or of complicated harmony, is yet to be proved. Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry. —Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry.

[4] To our reproach it must be said, that though for a century and a half we have had under our eyes the races of black and of red men, they have never yet been viewed by us as subjects of natural history. I advance it therefore as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind. It is not against experience to suppose, that different species of the same genus, or varieties of the same species, may possess different qualifications.

Discussion Questions:

1. In paragraph four, Jefferson said that it was “a suspicion only, that the blacks . . . are inferior to the whites in the endowments of both body and mind.” What does the rest of this text reveal about Jefferson’s thoughts on the African race?
2. What reasons did Jefferson give for his suspicion that Africans were inferior to whites? What are the problems and weaknesses of his argument?
3. Jefferson was a slaveholder who more than once spoke out about the evils of slavery. Yet he never freed his slaves. How might his attitudes regarding race have affected his apparently mixed feelings about slavery?

SOURCE: The base text for this electronic document is the edition of *Notes on the State of Virginia* from the Avalon Project at Yale Law School at <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/jevifram.htm>. Paragraph divisions and numbers have been added. Spellings have been modernized.



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