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## **Pursuing the Pursuit of Happiness: Delving into the Secret Minds of the American Founding Fathers\***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Thomas Jefferson's inspiration for including 'the pursuit of happiness' in the U.S. Declaration of Independence is usually traced back to the ideas of the English philosophers John Locke and William Wollaston as well as the Swiss philosopher Jean Jacques Burlamaqui. This may well be correct to a considerable extent. In this article, however, based on documentary evidence it is argued that the revolutionary ideas of two radical Enlightenment atheists, Paul-Henri Thiry Baron d'Holbach and Denis Diderot, may also have inspired Jefferson and others to write this phrase into the Declaration of Independence.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The sentence 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness' has inspired countless numbers of people all around the globe ever since it was included in the second section of the United States' *Declaration of Independence* in July of 1776. In more recent times 'the pursuit of happiness' has lost none of its relevance, as witnessed by the importance President Barack Obama attached to it in his Inaugural Address on January 21, 2013, at the beginning of his second term as the President of the United States:<sup>1</sup>

Vice President Biden, Mr. Chief Justice, members of the United States Congress, distinguished guests, and fellow citizens:

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Each time we gather to inaugurate a President we bear witness to the enduring strength of our Constitution. We affirm the promise of our democracy. We recall that what binds this nation together is not the colors of our skin or the tenets of our faith or the origins of our names. What makes us exceptional – what makes us American – is our allegiance to an idea articulated in a declaration made more than two centuries ago:

‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’.

Today we continue a never-ending journey to bridge the meaning of those words with the realities of our time. For history tells us that while these truths may be self-evident, they have never been self-executing; that while freedom is a gift from God, it must be secured by His people here on Earth. The patriots of 1776 did not fight to replace the tyranny of a king with the privileges of a few or the rule of a mob. They gave to us a republic, a government of, and by, and for the people, entrusting each generation to keep safe our founding creed.

The *Declaration of Independence* was mostly written by Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826). His draft version was influenced and commented on by other founding fathers, most notably Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790), and John Adams (1735–1826), who would later become the second President of the United States (Jefferson became its third president). The final text was adopted by the Second Continental Congress in Philadelphia on July 4, 1776, and then publicly proclaimed.

It is usually thought that major sources of inspiration were the English philosophers John Locke (1632–1704) and William Wollaston (1659–1724), as well as the Swiss philosopher Jean Jacques Burlamaqui (1694–1748), all of whom emphasized the importance of happiness as a major individual goal in life. In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, first published anonymously in 1689, Locke formulated this as follows:

§ 51. The necessity of pursuing happiness [is] the foundation of liberty.

As therefore the highest perfection of intellectual nature lies in a careful and constant pursuit of true and solid happiness;

so the care of ourselves, that we mistake not imaginary for real happiness, is the necessary foundation of our liberty (Locke 1796: 252).

In his turn, Locke may well have been inspired by the Dutch philosopher Baruch de Spinoza (1632–1677), who had argued in *Ethica*, published posthumously in 1677, that humans should aim at achieving happiness by intellectually understanding the laws of nature in a loving way. By doing so they would discover God.<sup>2</sup> Baruch de Spinoza, in his turn, had built on the works of the French philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650), who had spent more than 20 years of his life in the Dutch republic. All of these philosophers were inspired, directly or indirectly, by the Greek philosopher Epicurus (341 BCE–270 BCE). We will see Jefferson's summary of Epicurus's ideas below.

This article will not trace the entire history of the idea of the pursuit of happiness. It will explore instead what Jefferson's understanding of, and sources of inspiration for, the pursuit of happiness may have been, especially important sources that may have been neglected.

Before embarking on this exploration, one may wonder why the theme of the pursuit of happiness suddenly took center stage in Western Europe during the 17<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> centuries as a major philosophical theme. The answer seems to be that during this period of time, the growing middle class was gaining power and influence. As part of that process, such people increasingly wanted to determine their own lives, while they rejected the constraints exercised by traditional royalties and the Roman Catholic Church.

Before that time, people in Europe would also have felt more or less happy, depending on the circumstances. But because of the very unequal balances of power and dependency they had often very little grip on their lives, and as a result they would have found it hard to develop and express systematic thoughts about it. The rise of the middle classes in Renaissance Europe meant the establishment of increasing numbers of relatively wealthy people, who not only had the ambition and the means to control their own lives to a greater extent than before, but who also had the literary means at their disposal, including the printing press, to express and diffuse ideas about happiness.

In Western Europe, the first republic in which burghers began to rule themselves was the Seven United Provinces with Amsterdam as its dominant, very wealthy, urban center. In this city of traders and artisans, there was also some room for contemplation and discussion. This was the milieu in which Dutch philosopher Baruch de Spinoza developed his often controversial thoughts, including his statements about the importance of happiness.

In doing so, Spinoza made use of ideas expressed by Descartes as well as thoughts voiced much earlier by the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus, who had lived in similar circumstances, and perhaps not surprisingly, had come up with similar ideas. In their footsteps, and perhaps also inspired by others living in similar urban environments, West-European scholars began to elaborate philosophical implications of happiness as a major goal in life, most notably in Britain, but also elsewhere, wherever there was room to discuss and express such ideas.

### **WHAT DID THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS MEAN AT THE TIME OF THE U.S. INDEPENDENCE?**

In contrast to what many people in the USA and elsewhere may think today, namely that the pursuit of happiness is a purely individual affair, during the period of the Enlightenment it often meant more than that. The U.S. scholar Lawrence S. Miller formulated this contemporary view as follows:

To the [American] colonists, happiness was not to be equated with hedonism. For them, happiness was the freedom to use their time, talent, and resources to live a life that they believed would bring them the most satisfaction, and would benefit their family, friends, fellow men, and future generations the most (Miller n.d.).

These ideas did not emerge in North America. Although happiness is an individual feeling, a number of European Enlightenment philosophers, and, in their footsteps, some educated people on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean also saw it as a social affair, because humans, having empathy for others, could not be truly happy while others were not.

This was certainly Thomas Jefferson's position later in life. In his letter to William Short written on October, 31 in 1819, Jeffer-

son explained that he was very much attracted to the philosophy of Epicurus, who had held such a position. In the same letter he provided a summary that he had made 'some twenty years ago' of Epicurus's most important ideas.<sup>3</sup>

In that summary he mentions: 'happiness which the well-regulated indulgences of Epicurus ensure', which was based on:

**Moral.**

- Happiness is the aim of life.
- Virtue is the foundation of happiness.
- Utility is the test of virtue.

**Virtue consists in:**

- prudence;
- temperance;
- fortitude;
- justice.

These statements may make one think that Epicurus' ideas were the main source of Jefferson's pursuit of happiness. However, Jefferson's letter was penned down a full forty-three years after he wrote those famous words into the *Declaration of Independence*, while his summary of Epicurus' philosophy dated back to at least twenty years after those events. Would Epicurus have been his main source of inspiration? Or would there have been other scholars that had inspired Jefferson in 1776?

All the references showing Jefferson's interest in Epicurus' philosophy known to me date back exclusively to this much later period in his life. This makes it unlikely, but not entirely impossible, that Epicurus' philosophy played a major direct role in Jefferson's thinking in July of 1776.

**WHAT DID JEFFERSON KNOW ABOUT ENLIGHTENMENT PHILOSOPHERS AND THEIR IDEAS?**

During the eighteenth century, many educated citizens in North America, including Thomas Jefferson, closely followed the intellectual developments in Western Europe (see, *e.g.*, Spurlin 1976). But what did Jefferson exactly know about these West-European philosophers? Jefferson lived most of his life on his estate of Monticello in Virginia, which today is both a museum and a World

Heritage site. As the online Monticello library shows, Jefferson had all their major works in his collection, which means that he knew about their ideas at least later in life.<sup>4</sup> But was he aware of them when he wrote the *Declaration of Independence*? According to the Monticello web site:<sup>5</sup>

Thomas Jefferson used no books or pamphlets to help him write the Declaration of Independence. But since his early days, he had thought and read about government and the rights of mankind. He read British writer John Locke, who believed that people are born with natural rights. Governments should be for the benefit of everyone, not just the rulers. (These ideas were evident in Jefferson's ideas for Virginia's new state constitution.) Thomas Paine had also expressed a similar idea in *Common Sense*: 'A government of our own is our natural right'.

Jefferson's draft was also influenced by George Mason, a plantation owner in Virginia. Mason wrote a phrase similar to 'pursuit of happiness' in his draft of 'Virginia's Declaration of Rights'. Jefferson was probably influenced by Dr. William Small of Scotland as well. Small had taught Jefferson for four years at the College of William and Mary. Jefferson described his professor as a man with 'an enlarged and liberal mind'.

'I did not consider it as any part of my charge to invent new ideas...', Thomas Jefferson later wrote about writing the Declaration, 'but to place before mankind the common sense of the subject'.

Common sense? Where did this term come from? Most Americans would probably identify Thomas Paine (1737–1809) as the author of the revolutionary document *Common Sense*, as we just saw. Written in early 1776, this document did much to inflame American emotions to strive for independence. But Paine was not the intellectual father of this title. Another founding father had invented it, namely the medical doctor Benjamin Rush (1746–1813) from Philadelphia, one of the signers of the *Declaration of Independence*. This will be discussed in more detail below, while focusing on the role Benjamin Rush may have played in possibly conveying controversial notions to Jefferson about the pursuit of happiness.

## THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS IN PUBLIC DOCUMENTS IN BRITISH AMERICA

Before the Declaration of Independence, 'happiness' had already appeared in public documents in British America. In July of 1774, Thomas Jefferson wrote the following words in *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*:

To remind him [the King of Britain] that our ancestors, before their emigration to America, were the free inhabitants of the British dominions in Europe, and possessed a right which nature has given to all men, of departing from the country in which chance, not choice, has placed them, of going in quest of new habitations, and of there establishing new societies, under such laws and regulations as to them shall seem most likely to promote public happiness.

According to its original title, this document contained the *Instructions to the Delegates of Virginia representing this state at the First Continental Congress*. This revolutionary meeting took place in September and October of 1774 in Philadelphia, where the *Instructions* received ample and favorable attention. Thomas Jefferson did not attend this congress himself. The Instructions were soon printed and often reprinted as *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*.<sup>6</sup>

In this document Jefferson used the term 'public happiness', which should be promoted by state law instead of pursued by its citizens. The idea of 'public happiness' had been used before in this way by the German mathematician and philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646[1680]). In his turn, Leibniz had been influenced by Spinoza. As explained above, the idea of public happiness was more than only a personal affair. In order to be happy, others had to be happy, too. Virtuous, educated behavior should ensure that.

In the first and second article of the *Virginia Declaration of Rights* adopted unanimously by the Virginia Convention of Delegates on June 12, 1776, written by George Mason (1725–1792), only one month before the *Declaration of Independence* was proclaimed, it is stated:

That all men are by nature equally free and independent, and have certain inherent rights, of which, when they enter into a state of society, they cannot, by any compact, deprive

or divest their posterity; namely, the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety.

This official public document may have been the first time that the pursuit of happiness was written into. So here, suddenly the pursuit of happiness appeared. How did that happen? And why at that time? What inspired Mason to write this? And whose idea was it? Was it indeed Mason's idea, or was it, perhaps, someone else's inspiration?

All the major players at the time, most notably George Mason, Thomas Jefferson (both delegates from Virginia), Benjamin Rush, and Benjamin Franklin knew each other well, and were exchanging ideas all the time. Especially Franklin and Rush appear to have been important spiders in this web, as we will see below.

Whatever the case may have been, between 1774 and 1776 new ideas about happiness began to circulate among the founding fathers. Where did they come from, and who propagated them?

In the same month of June, 1776, during which the Virginia Declaration of Rights was adopted, Jefferson drafted the *Declaration of Independence* in Philadelphia. Jefferson had discussed this with his colleagues, and had submitted his draft to his fellow delegates. It seems that especially Benjamin Franklin was involved. According to the U.S. scholar Mark Skousen:

Benjamin Franklin was in league with Jefferson emphasizing the defense of 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' as the goal of government, and downplaying the right to 'property' (Skousen 2006: 413).

This is a reference to the statement made by John Locke in his *Two Treatises of Government*, published anonymously in 1689:

and it is not without reason, that he [man] seeks out, and is willing to join in society with others, who are already united, or have a mind to unite, for the mutual preservation of their lives, liberties and estates, which I call by the general name, property (Locke 1689: 2<sup>nd</sup> Treatise, § 123).

According to Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, a daughter of former presidential candidate Robert Kennedy:

This is what the American Revolution was all about. Jefferson declared that the pursuit of happiness was an inalien-



able right, along with life and liberty. The story goes that Jefferson, on the advice of Benjamin Franklin, substituted the phrase 'pursuit of happiness' for the word 'property', which was favored by George Mason. Franklin thought that 'property' was too narrow a notion (Kennedy Townsend 2011).

I have not been able to trace the source of this story. But if correct, did this happen solely because the founding fathers wanted to combine Locke's ideas on preserving life, liberty, and estate from *Two Treatises of Government* with his emphasis on the importance of pursuing happiness in *An Essay on Human Understanding*?

Whatever the case may have been, it seems as if between 1774 and 1776 the pursuit of happiness suddenly took center stage in the discussion among the American founding fathers. But had Locke's work, and perhaps those of Wollaston and Burlamaqui, been the only major sources of the pursuit of happiness, or had there perhaps been other sources of inspiration, which may not yet have received the attention they possibly deserve?

### **WHAT ABOUT BARON D'HOLBACH AND HIS IDEAS?**

As noticed before, the importance of happiness was part and parcel of the larger Enlightenment discussion, in which views of reality were pursued through reason and not with the aid of religious beliefs. An important player in this discourse was the currently little known, but at the time very controversial, philosopher Baron d'Holbach.

Paul-Henri Thiry Baron d'Holbach (1723–1789), of German descent, was a leading atheist thinker and a most active participant of the French Enlightenment. After inheriting a fortune which made him financially independent, he moved to Paris. A great friend of Denis Diderot (1713–1784), D'Holbach ran a prominent salon in Paris, famous for its good food and even better wines, which was frequented by the leading freethinkers of his time.

As part of his intellectual efforts, D'Holbach wrote and translated about 400 articles on a great variety of subjects for Diderot and d'Alembert's famous *Encyclopédie*. But he also wrote books that were published anonymously. At the time, his thoughts were considered subversive. During this period, every publication had to

be approved by royal censors. As a result, D'Holbach and others published their ideas anonymously, often in other, more tolerant countries, mainly in Holland. These books were then smuggled back to France, where they circulated in secret.<sup>7</sup>

Baron d'Holbach's book *Système de la Nature ou des lois du monde physique et du monde moral* was published in 1770, according to the book in London, but in reality in Amsterdam by Marc-Michel Rey, under the name of Jean Baptiste de Mirabaud (a prominent French scholar who had passed away ten years earlier). In this book, D'Holbach explained his views on religion and morals. First of all, he placed humans squarely within the rest of nature, including the universe, which he saw as solely ruled by matter, motion and energy (a rather modern point of view).<sup>8</sup>

The thrust of D'Holbach's argument was to deny any religious explanations of nature or divinely decreed moral rules for humans. In volume one he explained that if humans followed the laws of nature (instead of following religious doctrines) and pursued happiness in virtuous ways, which required a lot of attention for making other people happy, societies would automatically become harmonious. In both volumes, but especially in volume two, D'Holbach viciously attacked all religions, while promoting atheism as the only way to achieve the goals outlined in the first part.

Like other Enlightenment philosophers, D'Holbach's concept of pursuing happiness was far removed from selfish egocentrism, but was instead embedded in what we may now call an empathetic way of dealing with other people, but which was then called virtuous behavior. As we saw earlier, such ways of understanding happiness may go back all the way to Epicurus.

The novel aspect that D'Holbach added to the discussion was that virtuous ways of pursuing happiness could substitute moral rules based on religious doctrines. As he saw it, if people behaved virtuously while pursuing happiness, a harmonious society would automatically come as a result. No religion was needed anymore to proclaim moral rules, because the virtuous pursuit of happiness would be sufficient to ensure moral societies.

This was very controversial at the time, also in France, because like in so many European monarchies, the French state and church supported each other in legitimizing their power. Attacking official

religious beliefs and rules therefore immediately implied eroding state and church influence. As a result, state and church officials tried to ban these ideas.

This meant that the *philosophes* who attended D'Holbach's salon had to operate very carefully, including publishing their controversial ideas under pseudonyms. If not, they might easily have ended up in jail, if not worse. This had already happened to Denis Diderot in 1747. He only regained his freedom after signing an official letter saying that he would never write blasphemous statements again. As a result, Diderot never published major philosophical works any more, but used his *Encyclopédie* instead, and perhaps also D'Holbach's writings, to express his radical thoughts (Blom 2010: 47–51).

### **WHY WOULD D'HOLBACH'S IDEAS HAVE BEEN ATTRACTIVE TO THE FOUNDING FATHERS?**

Baron d'Holbach's idea of how to achieve a harmonious society without moral rules based on religious doctrines may have appealed to the founding fathers, because they were planning to set up a republic in which there was no room for an official state religion. As a result, Jefferson and others may have seen a need to ensure moral behavior without religious guidelines. This may have stimulated them to write the pursuit of happiness into the *Declaration of Independence*.

Although Jefferson considered himself a Christian because he admired the teachings of Jesus, he never saw himself as belonging to a specific church. Benjamin Franklin, who was almost 40 years older than Jefferson, was an even more pragmatic character. For him, the social effects of religion, especially virtuous behavior, were its most important aspects, not faith (Isaacson 2003: 46ff.).

Already in his youth, Franklin clearly showed an interest into the question of how people could be made to behave morally, which for him was a major reason to stick to religion. In 1725, Franklin declared of deism (God to be found in the laws of nature, revealed through the scientific study of nature): 'I began to suspect that this doctrine, though it might be true, was not very useful' [for stimulating moral behavior] (quoted in Isaacson 2003: 46). This became evident in 1735, when he publicly defended the preacher Samuel Hemphill, who got himself in deep trouble with the Pres-

byterian church in Philadelphia, because he had preached that God wanted us to lead virtuous lives, which was more important for salvation than faith (Isaacson 2003: 107–109). Although not anti-religious, Franklin was clearly on a similar track as the French *philosophes*. As a result, he may have liked D'Holbach's ideas when he became familiar with them, and may have helped spreading them.

### **COULD JEFFERSON AND FRANKLIN HAVE KNOWN ABOUT *SYSTÈME DE LA NATURE*?**

It may be very difficult to find conclusive evidence for a possible influence of D'Holbach's revolutionary ideas in the works of Jefferson and others. In all likelihood, the founding fathers would have been very reluctant to admit that they had been inspired by D'Holbach's proposals as a result of his strong atheist stance. Because *Système de la Nature* was so virulently anti-religious, it had been condemned, banned, and even burned in France after its anonymous publication in 1770 (Blom 2010).

Yet some evidence exists indicating that both Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin were not only aware of these ideas, but also that especially Jefferson showed a keen, although mostly hidden interest in them. In the Monticello online library, the following information can be found:<sup>9</sup>

#### **System of Nature.**

Thomas Jefferson owned several editions of Baron d'Holbach's System of Nature.

#### SET 1:

His first set is a 2-volume work which he acquired while in France between 1784–1789. He records it both in his 1789 Catalog on p. 22, and his 1783 Catalog on p. 77 as:

Systeme de la nature. 8vo. par le Baron D'Holbach  
Vrai sens du systeme de la nature )

He appears to have held this set back from the 1815 sale to Congress, as it appears in his Retirement Library manuscript on page 62 as: Systeme de la Nature. 2.v. 8vo. 1771.

#### SET 2:

He also acquired a 6-volume edition in petit format most likely post-France, recorded also on p. 77 of his 1783 Catalog as: do. 6.v. p.f.

This set turns up in his Poplar Forest Library, as it appears in the 1873 Leavitt catalog as: D'Holbach (Baron.) *Système de la Nature*. 6 vols. 12mo, calf, gilt. Paris, 1790

SET 3: (Vol. 1 only)

In addition, he had an English edition of vol. 1, recorded also on p. 77 of his 1783 Catalog as: *The System of nature* (d'Holbach's) Eng. 1st. vol. 12 mo.

This copy was sold to Congress in 1815 and appears in the Sowerby as entry #1260. This copy, which survives at the Library of Congress, has a preface dated January 1808, with the following imprint info:

System of Nature; or, the Laws of the Moral and Physical World. Translated from the French of M. Mirabaud, one of the forty Members of, and perpetual Secretary to, the French Academy . . . Part First. Volume First. Philadelphia: Published by R. Benson, 1808.

So later in life Jefferson knew about *Système de la Nature* and its author. He owned three different editions, and he held back the two French editions while transferring most of his books to the Library of Congress. Apparently, he held these works in high esteem.

However, Jefferson wrote very little about *Système de la Nature* and its author(s). In his online letters, the only references that can be found are the following:

*Letter to John Adams, from Monticello, dated April 8, 1816.*<sup>10</sup>

Although I never heard Grimm express the opinion, directly, yet I always supposed him to be of the school of Diderot, D'Alembert, D'Holbach, the first of whom committed their system of atheism to writing in 'Le bon sens', and the last in his 'Systeme de la Nature'. It was a numerous school in the Catholic countries, while the infidelity of the Protestant took generally the form of Theism.

*Letter to Thomas Law Poplar Forest, June 13, 1814.*<sup>11</sup>

I have observed, indeed, generally, that while in protestant countries the defections from the Platonic Christianity of the priests is to Deism, in catholic countries they are to Atheism. Diderot, D'Alembert, D'Holbach, Condorcet, are known to have been among the most virtuous of men. Their virtue, then, must have had some other foundation than the love of God.

So Jefferson knew not only the contents of *Système de la Nature*, but also praised the author and his fellow philosophes for being virtuous themselves, even though he knew they were atheists.

Thomas Jefferson stayed in France between 1784–1789. In a letter to James Madison from Paris dated September 1, 1785, Jefferson provided his shipping list of books. This included:<sup>12</sup>

Système de la nature de Diderot. 3. v. 8 vo. 21f  
(prohibited) . . . . . 21 livres – 0 sous

So in 1785, relatively soon after he had arrived in France, Jefferson purchased a prohibited, very controversial book that he must have valued greatly, given that he took the risk to buy it and have it shipped to the USA. Apparently, in 1785 Jefferson thought that Denis Diderot had written *Système de la Nature*. Yet in 1789 he knew better, as we just saw from his handwritten Monticello library notes. How did Jefferson find out? I do not know, but I suspect that he came to this conclusion during his stay in France as a result of participating in Parisian intellectual circles.<sup>13</sup>

It is important to note that in 1785 when Jefferson arrived in France he thought, that Diderot had written *Système de la Nature*. If he thought so then, Jefferson, and possibly other founding fathers as well, probably thought so, too, in 1776, if they had known the book, or its ideas, at that time. Why might he have thought so?

Since the book was published under a pseudonym in 1770, the name of the real author was unknown. And because Diderot and D'Holbach were well known to cooperate closely in their writings, while Diderot was an outspoken atheist who loved to show off his wit and knowledge, it is not surprising that many readers would have concluded that Diderot was the author. In fact, to this day it is not clear who of them wrote exactly what in *Système de la Nature*.<sup>14</sup>

#### **WHAT DID THE FOUNDING FATHERS KNOW ABOUT D'HOLBACH'S IDEAS IN 1776?**

Could Jefferson and Franklin have known about the ideas expressed in *Système de la Nature* in 1776? In 2010, I decided to find out. The best starting place to explore these things was the Library Company in Philadelphia, founded in 1731 by no other than Benjamin Franklin and friends. In 1773, the Library Company moved

to what is now Carpenters Hall. This place became the scene of the First Continental Congress in 1774, while it served as the major library for delegates meeting at the Second Continental Congress in 1775 and 1776 to discuss the *Declaration of Independence*.

According to the description of the Library Company's history provided on its web site:

In fact, for a quarter century, from 1774 until the national capital was established in Washington, D.C., in 1800, the Library Company, long the most important book resource for colonial Philadelphians, served as the de facto Library of Congress before there was one de jure. Unfortunately, no circulation records for the period exist, so we can never know which delegate or congressman borrowed or consulted what work. But virtually every significant work on political theory, history, law, and statecraft (and much else besides) could be found on the Library Company's shelves, as well as numerous tracts and polemical writings by American as well as European authors. And virtually all of those works that were influential in framing the minds of the Framers of the nation are still on the Library Company's shelves.<sup>15</sup>

The Library Company is now located in Locust Street, in Philadelphia's Center City. Its web site includes an online catalog, which, to my delight, contained the following entry:<sup>16</sup>

Holbach, Paul Henri Thiry, baron d', 1723–1789:  
Système de la nature ou des loix du monde physique & du monde moral. Par M. Mirabaud, ...  
Londres [i.e. Amsterdam], 1771.  
2v. ; 8°.

They also have:

Holbach, Paul Henri Thiry, baron d', 1723–1789:  
System of nature, or, The laws of the moral and physical world / translated from the French of M. Mirabaud.  
Philadelphia: R. T. Rawl, 1808.

In January of 2010 I had a chance to go and have a look. I was shown *Volume Two* of the French 1771 edition, which was full of pencil marks in the margins. It had clearly been studied thoroughly, apparently by someone who was sufficiently interested in these atheist arguments to keep reading. According to the information

inside, it had been donated in 1869 to the Ridgway Branch of the Philadelphia Library by Dr. James Rush, so almost a century after US Independence. Clearly, this copy had not been part of the Library Company's collection in 1776. But it might have been in Philadelphia in 1776.

Dr. James Rush was a keeper of his father's books (Corner 1948: 6). And his father was no other than Dr. Benjamin Rush, one of the founding fathers of the US Republic. He was a famous medical doctor, who had founded the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Benjamin Rush had also been one of the signers of the *Declaration of Independence*. Would Benjamin Rush perhaps have owned this copy, and perhaps also the English translation, which was also part of the James Rush collection? If so, this would show that like Jefferson, Benjamin Rush, or perhaps his family, had fostered more than usual interest in these subversive ideas. If so, when and why would that have happened?

### **BENJAMIN RUSH'S CAREER**

Let us trace the career of Benjamin Rush. As a young man, he had gone to Edinburgh, Scotland, to study medicine, where he lived between 1766 and 1769. At the end of his stay, in January and February of 1769, he visited Benjamin Franklin in London before going to Paris on Feb. 16, where he stayed until March 21. On his way back to Philadelphia, he met Franklin again in London.

During his visit to Paris, Benjamin Rush met Denis Diderot, who may have told him about the latest ideas concerning the pursuit of happiness, which, if pursued the right way, could function to secure a moral society. If so, Rush could have reported these ideas to Franklin in London, attributing them to Diderot instead of Baron d'Holbach.

After Rush returned to Philadelphia in 1769, he may have communicated these ideas to others, where they may have begun circulating. In the early 1770s, Benjamin Rush and Thomas Jefferson were part of the same intellectual circles, which would contribute to explain why Jefferson thought that Diderot had been the author of the *Système de la Nature*.

Therefore I decided to explore Benjamin Rush's visit to Paris in 1769 and subsequent revolutionary activities in more detail, and also Benjamin Franklin's possible role in spreading the word.



**BENJAMIN RUSH'S VISIT TO PARIS**

What was Franklin's role in introducing Rush to Parisian thinkers? And how well was Franklin informed about what was going on there in 1769?

Franklin had been staying in London between 1757 and 1762, and again between 1765 and 1775. Already before that time, Franklin had become well known in France. As a result of his electricity experiments in Philadelphia in 1749, which had been translated into French in 1752, he was fêted as a major natural philosopher during his visit to Paris in September 1767, where he had met many prominent figures (Isaacson 2003).

However, it is not clear whether Franklin met any of the *philosophes* during this visit. But even if he did not, he surely had become aware of some of their ideas. During his stay in Britain, Franklin maintained excellent contacts with many British intellectuals, including the Scottish philosopher David Hume, who had visited D'Holbach's salon in 1763 and perhaps also later during his stay in France between 1763 and 1766 as the British ambassador's secretary. Mr. Hume had maintained contacts with those controversial circles ever since (Blom 2010: 137ff.).

In February of 1769, when Benjamin Rush visited Franklin in London, the latter gave Rush a set of introduction letters to leading French thinkers, which he used to good effect. Franklin also provided credit letters (Hawke 1971: 76). One of the introduction letters was addressed to Diderot, who according to German-born U.S. historian Philipp Blom:

welcomed the American visitor with great kindness, offering to write a letter of introduction to David Hume in London. It is unlikely and would have certainly been unusual for Franklin to have written such a letter to Diderot had he not met the philosophe in person (Blom 2010: 289).

In Rush's own handwritten account of his visit to Paris in 1769, held by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, he mentioned happiness four times as something very important to strive for. During this visit he described meeting:

Physicians, Chemists, Philosophers and Academicians, to who[m] I was recommended, and among whom, I spent my

time in the most agreeable manner during my stay in Paris. – There is no difficulty of getting acquainted with Men of this Character in France. – They seem to acquire knowledge only for the sake of communicating it. Besides this, they are extremely polite and hospitable, and have none of those formalities which so much distinguish Men of Science in other countries.<sup>17</sup>

In this manuscript Rush mentioned only one scholar by name, namely ‘John Barbeau [sic] Dubourg’, [...] ‘to Whom I was introduced by a letter from Dr. Franklin’. Jean Barbeau Dubourg was then translating part of Franklin's work. In Rush's words:<sup>18</sup>

When I first went into his house, I found him employed in translating the Farmers Letters into French. – The first question he asked me was, whether I knew the author of them? I told him that I had that Honour. – He then broke out into a great many fine encomiums upon them, and sd [said] ‘that in his Opinion, the Roman Orator Cicero, was less eloquent, than the Pennsylvania Farmer’. – Here I beheld (to borrow an Allusion from the Farmers Letters) ‘The Fire of Liberty, still blazing in a country, after the altar upon which it was kindled, was burned to the ground. – In a little time I forgot that he was a Stranger, I forgot that he was a Frenchman; I forgot that he was once the Enemy of my Country. I took him into my Arms, nay more. – I took him into my very Heart. – From that moment he became my Friend, and should I gain no other advantage by going to France, than the benefit of his Friendship, and correspondence, I shall esteem my Visit well bestowed.

Rush did not mention Diderot or Baron d'Holbach. Yet in his autobiography penned down in 1800, about thirty years after his visit to Paris, Rush mentioned that:

Mr. Diderot entertained me in his library. He gave me a letter to Mr. Hume when I left him. I delivered this letter to Mr. Hume upon my return to London. It gave me an opportunity of spending a part of a forenoon in his company. His conversation at the time was general (Corner 1948: 69).

Why did Rush not mention his encounter with Diderot in his earlier travel account? Was this visit perhaps deemed too controversial? Given that there were spies everywhere, and that he may have had to pass customs with the manuscript in his luggage, Rush

may have been reluctant to mention such a potentially dangerous visit.

We will probably never know what was discussed during that meeting. But one wonders whether Diderot informed Rush about D'Holbach (and/or perhaps also his own) controversial ideas about pursuing happiness the right way, which would automatically lead to a morally virtuous society, no religion needed. As mentioned before, this may help to explain why, in 1785, Jefferson thought that Diderot had written *Système de la Nature*, after he had purchased the prohibited book in France.

If Rush had heard about these ideas during his Paris visit of 1769, he may well have told Franklin on his return to London. Both gentlemen may subsequently have spread these ideas in Philadelphia and elsewhere. Because *Système de la Nature* had caused such an international uproar after its publication in 1770, surely Franklin must have heard about these things later during his continued stay in London, that lasted until 1775. The same may have happened to Benjamin Rush on the other side of the ocean, which would explain why he may have held a 1771 copy of this book in his library. We may never know with certainty whether Rush and Franklin knew about these ideas, agreed with them, and used them to influence Jefferson. But they may have done so, given the following evidence.

#### **RUSH'S AND FRANKLIN'S POSSIBLE INVOLVEMENT IN SPREADING D'HOLBACH'S IDEAS IN PHILADELPHIA**

While Franklin returned to Philadelphia only in 1775, Rush had been back home there since 1769. After his return, Rush became very much involved in politics, including taking part in the First and Second Colonial Congress. But Benjamin Rush did much more than that. According to the US scholar Alexander Leitch:

Soon after his return home Rush was appointed to a chair of chemistry in the College of Philadelphia's medical department, thus becoming at the age of twenty-three the first professor of chemistry in America. He built up a large private practice, at first among the poor, but he found time to further other interests. He published a pamphlet on the iniquity of the slave trade, and helped organize the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery and the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage, the first

antislavery society in America; he later became its president. In the growing quarrel between the colonies and the mother country, he associated with such leaders as Thomas Paine, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson. It was on his urging that Thomas Paine wrote a strong tract on behalf of complete American independence to which he gave the title, suggested by Rush, *Common Sense* (Leitch 1978).

In his autobiography written in 1800, Benjamin Rush explained that he himself had fostered a strong desire to write a document like *Common Sense*, but that he did not want to risk his career, in case there was a strong backlash. So he urged the newcomer and outsider Thomas Paine to do the job (Corner 1948: 113–114). *Common Sense* was first published anonymously on January 10, 1776. In this document, Paine mentions happiness several times, including the following:

Should any body of men be hereafter delegated for this or some similar purpose, I offer them the following extracts from that wise observer on governments Dragonetti. 'The science' says he 'of the politician consists in fixing the true point of happiness and freedom. Those men would deserve the gratitude of ages, who should discover a mode of government that contained the greatest sum of individual happiness, with the least national expense.'<sup>19</sup>

Who was Giacinto Dragonetti? The U.S. scholar Edward Larkin formulated it as follows:

Giacinto Dragonetti (1738–1818) had served as Italian consul to Sicily and eventually became president of the Royal Court of Sicily. His *Treatise of Virtues and Rewards* was originally published in Naples in 1765 and was written translated into English in a London edition in 1769. The *Treatise* was written in response to Beccaria's influential *On Crimes and Punishments* (Livorno, 1764). Both works were read by politicians and intellectuals in Europe and America (see Larkin 2004: footnote on p. 74).

Here we see a clear hint, from a then reputable Italian source, to the importance of thinking about individual people's happiness as an important goal to be pursued by governments. Although Dragonetti's ideas about happiness are related to Leibniz' public happiness, it was a slightly different notion, because in Dragonetti's

view, governments had to find ways to promote individual happiness, not necessarily by law but possibly also by other means. And those men who found a way of doing so, would 'deserve the gratitude of ages'. Could the inclusion of this passage in *Common Sense* perhaps be interpreted as an effort to stimulate such discussions as well as a hint that the solution might be near at hand?

Because of Rush's close supervision of the writing of *Common Sense*, including suggesting its title, we may suspect that he not only totally agreed with the occurrence and use of happiness, but that he may also have suggested referring to it the way it was done. And, as we saw above, Jefferson saw 'common sense' as a major source of inspiration for the *Declaration of Independence*. Perhaps, Rush and Paine saw *Common Sense* as a way of publicly stimulating the discussion about the pursuit of happiness leading to harmonious societies without mentioning the controversial French *philosophes*.

All of this may seem a little farfetched. But it might become a little less implausible if we consider that in 1772, Baron d'Holbach had published a summary of *Système de la Nature* with the title *Le Bon Sens, ou Idées naturelles opposées aux idées surnaturelles*, which was translated into English as *Common Sense: or, Natural ideas opposed to supernatural*. This title can be found in the Monticello online catalog of the Jefferson library.<sup>20</sup>

So possibly, the title of Thomas Paine's revolutionary document of 1776 contained a secret hint to the moral ideas of French revolutionary thinkers. And even more intriguingly, the Kindle version of *Le Bon Sens* of 1772 from the University of Toronto library has two names on its front page written with pencil, namely 'Payne' and 'Franklin'. This shows that at least one other person suspected such a connection, too.<sup>21</sup>

Throughout the years that followed, Benjamin Rush, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin wrote very little, if anything, about D'Holbach or Diderot. Like many Americans today, they might have tried to avoid becoming contaminated with possible accusations of being atheists and radical thinkers (Blom 2003). But both Franklin and Rush, being the practical politicians that they were, may have suggested to Jefferson that these ideas might contribute to keeping the new state virtuous and happy without the need for an official state religion (which both of them did not want).

Benjamin Rush wrote also very little about his own role in formulating the *Declaration of Independence*. But in 1800 he wrote the following:

Most of the men who had been active in bringing it about, were blind actors in the business. Not one man in a thousand contemplated or wished for the independance [sic] of our country in 1774, and but few who assented to it, foresaw the immense influence it would soon have on the national and individual characters of the Americans. It would be a truth if God had said it, that 'the way of man is not in himself, and that it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps' (Jeremiah X: 23) (Corner 1948: 119).

One wonders what this passage means. Surely, among the few who had the foresight in 1774 that independence would come, and that they needed to prepare for that, were Jefferson and Rush himself. And they had not been 'blind actors'. Rush's biblical reference, written in 1800 after he had become much older and more religious, may have been a way of diverting the attention from more secular influences that had played a role in 1776.

At that time Rush had been far less religious, as evidenced, for instance, by the fact that he had been the 'chief and zealous opponent' in June of 1776 to including a religious oath as part of the ritual to become a Member of the Pennsylvania Assembly (Yawke 1971: 158–160). Almost needless to say, this opposition ties in very well with his possible endorsement of Baron d'Holbach's ideas about happiness.

In his autobiography, Rush described meeting Jefferson in May or June of 1775 during a party near Philadelphia on the banks of the Schuylkill river, which was also attended by Franklin, celebrating George Washington's appointment as Commander in Chief of the American Armies (Corner 1948: 112). Benjamin Rush also took part in both the First Continental Congress in 1774, as well as the Second Continental Congress in 1775 and 1776, which counted both Jefferson and Franklin among its delegates (*Ibid.*: 110–112). During all those meetings, these gentlemen, who were also good friends, must have had ample time and opportunity to discuss all these things personally, if they did so.

We may never know whether that actually happened, because these ideas were considered so very controversial, and as a conse-

quence were kept under wraps. But surely, after their first meetings in 1775, suddenly the pursuit of happiness took center stage in American public documents. This may have been coincidence. But given the unusual interest of major players such as Jefferson and the Rush family in D'Holbach's ideas, as witnessed by the presence of his books in their libraries, I think it is quite likely that this indeed happened.

Whatever the situation may have been, Franklin was very eager to visit the *philosophes* in December of 1776, when he had become the first US ambassador to France, only a few months after signing the *Declaration of Independence*. As Philipp Blom reported:

On his arrival in Paris, 'I was asked whether I would like to see anyone in particular', wrote Franklin in a letter to Mme Helvétius [who ran a prominent salon; her late husband had been a major philosopher along similar lines as Diderot and D'Holbach, F.S.]. 'Take me to the philosophes', he replied, indicating that he knew about the Holbach circle and was eager to shake their hands (Blom 2003: 287).

Apparently he saw them as a major source of inspiration.

As was noted before, the reluctance to openly mention D'Holbach or Diderot, and their ideas as major sources of inspiration may also explain why much later in life, Jefferson ascribed his inspiration for thinking about happiness to Epicurus instead of to Diderot and D'Holbach, even though he praised them as virtuous persons, while he did not mention Locke, Wollaston, or Burlamaqui either. Epicurus was a very uncontroversial philosopher. He could not possibly have been a Christian, because he lived before Jesus of Nazareth. As a result, Epicurus, as a philosopher promoting virtuous behavior as a source of happiness, was a safe reference within the public discussion about the importance of religion in America, a discussion which is still very much alive today.

We may never know with certainty what happened in those days. But the circumstantial evidence is there, and all of it points into the same direction, namely that the ideas expressed in *Système de la Nature* may have been a major source of inspiration for including the pursuit of happiness into the *Declaration of Independence*.

While explicitly referring to the pursuit of happiness, President Obama's Second Inaugural Address of January 21, 2013 also contained the explicit message that in order to achieve a better future

for America, its citizens must work together (and in doing so stimulate each others' well-being and happiness). Jefferson, Diderot and D'Holbach would have been delighted to hear that.

### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> President Obama's Second Inaugural Address can be found on: [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov), accessed and downloaded on Jan. 22, 2013. In another article currently in preparation, the emergence of the feeling of happiness (and its opposite, unhappiness) in big history will be explored, as well as the related pursuit of happiness. This is part of my exploration of the emergence of moral behavior in big history (human history placed within the context of the history of the universe). These themes were already a major concern for Diderot and D'Holbach.

<sup>2</sup> Spinoza 2009 [1677]. Locke lived in the Dutch republic between 1683 and 1689.

<sup>3</sup> This letter can be found at: <http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/presidents/thomas-jefferson/letters-of-thomas-jefferson/jefl259.php>, accessed on Feb. 5, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> See [www.monticello.org](http://www.monticello.org), accessed on Feb. 5, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> See <http://classroom.monticello.org/kids/resources/profile/6/Middle/Jefferson-and-the-Declaration-of-Independence/>, accessed on Jan. 23, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> This document was published anonymously as: *A Summary View of the Rights of British America. Set Forth in Some Resolutions Intended for the Inspection of the Present Delegates of the People of Virginia.* Now in Convention. By a Native and Member of the House of Burgesses. Williamsburg, printed by Clementina Rind. More on: <http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/account/index.htm>, accessed on Feb. 6, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> An excellent study on Baron d'Holbach and friends is Blom (2010), which is a major source of information about them presented in this article.

<sup>8</sup> In doing so D'Holbach built on Descartes' insights. A recent English version of *System of Nature* is Baron d'Holbach (2001). On the Internet, several versions can be downloaded for free. A French Kindle version of his works is available very cheaply on Amazon.com (Baron d'Holbach 2013).

<sup>9</sup> See: [www.monticello.org](http://www.monticello.org), accessed on Jan. 23, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Letter available at <http://etext.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=JefLett.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=240&division=div1>, accessed on Feb. 7, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Letter available at <http://etext.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=JefLett.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=228&division=div1>, accessed on Feb. 7, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Letter available at <http://etext.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=JefLett.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=34&division=div1>



<sup>13</sup> The same shopping list contains Burlamaqui: *Principes du droit politique* (1751), in which Burlamaqui explicitly stated the importance of the pursuit of happiness, often seen as a major source of inspiration for Jefferson. As Philipp Blom (2010: 287) put it: ‘Holbach’s Paris library had the same books on its shelves – as philosophers he and Jefferson were speaking the same language’.

<sup>14</sup> For a critical discussion of this issue, see Topazio 1954. I am not sure how valid Topazio’s conclusions are. For instance, Topazio very much doubted that Diderot was seen as author of *Système de la Nature* during this period, which is contradicted by the fact that Jefferson clearly thought so in 1785.

<sup>15</sup> At the Instance of Benjamin Franklin: A Brief History of The Library Company of Philadelphia <http://librarycompany.org/about/Instance>, pdf downloaded on Feb. 6, 2013. The quotation can be found on p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> See [www.librarycompany.org](http://www.librarycompany.org), accessed on Feb. 7, 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Rush’s manuscript of his *Visit to Paris*, *Historical Society of Pennsylvania* (HSP), pp. 19–20. It is unclear when this account was written, but probably in 1769. I obtained a scan of this document from the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in December 2012. There is another copy in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York, which is said not to be his handwriting. The version published in Runes (1947: 373–395) titled ‘On Manners: Excerpts from a Diary Traveling Through France’ is probably the Pierpont Morgan version, because this title does not appear in the HSP document.

<sup>18</sup> Rush’s HSP manuscript of his *Visit to Paris*, p. 20.

<sup>19</sup> See <http://www.ushistory.org/paine/commonsense/singlehtml.htm>, accessed on Jan. 25, 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Monticello online library accessed on Feb. 18, 2013.

<sup>21</sup> Downloaded from [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org), on Feb. 18, 2013.

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