

# Acts of Remixing

In Engl 170-01 yesterday, we looked at Thomas Jefferson's [letter to Isaac McPherson](#) regarding the "peculiar character" of ideas. Unlike physical property, an idea can be transferred from one person to another, claims Jefferson, without being lost by its originator: "no one possesses [it] the less, because every other possesses the whole of it." This — an economist would say — "**nonrival**" character of ideas is fortunate, Jefferson suggests, because it permits ideas to "freely spread from one to another over the globe, for the moral and mutual instruction of man, and improvement of his condition."

Lawrence Lessig and other advocates of "**free culture**" similarly see the free (**as in speech, not as in beer**) circulation of culture as essential to humanity's forward progress. They emphasize how the stuff of culture is continually remixed to make new culture. As we move ahead in our class to Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books, we're beginning to ask how these books remix bits and pieces of the culture Carroll knew.

Before we leave Jefferson behind, though, we should note a bit of subtle remixing that he introduces directly into his explanation of why ideas must circulate freely. In the quotation below, note the words I've flagged in boldface:

*That ideas should freely spread from one to another over the globe, for the moral and mutual instruction of man, and improvement of his condition, seems to have been peculiarly and benevolently designed by nature, when she made them, like fire, expansible over all space, without lessening their density in any point, **and like the air in which we breathe, move, and have our physical being**, incapable of confinement or exclusive appropriation.*

Compare these words from the King James version of the Bible, [Acts 17:28](#):

*For in him we live, and move, and have our being.*

Jefferson hasn't exactly quoted, hasn't exactly alluded to, but has certainly made very intentional use of this characterization of the deity.

What do you think he hopes to accomplish by doing so?