

LSU PHIL 2035
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Notes on Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments of the Evil of Slavery*

[I've benefitted from reading work on Cugoano by Chike Jeffers.]

Cugoano was born in what is now Ghana in 1757. He was abducted and enslaved, sent to the slave plantations in the "West Indies." He was brought to England after some months in the islands, in 1772. He benefitted from the Mansfield decision in the Somerset case (see below), so he became a domestic servant rather than slave. Active in the anti-slavery network in London, he published two versions of *Thoughts and Sentiments*. The first, full, version was published in 1787, and an abridged version in 1791. We'll read the abridged version, but with the addition of the short sketch of Cugoano's abduction from the earlier piece.

He leads into the abduction story with a reflection on humanity and animality and on education.

If his enemies, the slave-traders, say that Africans are like beasts of the field, then not only are they, the slave-traders "brutish," but they are "wicked and base" as well.

He then implicitly distinguishes "knowledge" or "learning" from "wisdom" or "goodness." This is a constant theme in anti-slavery / anti-racism writings: keeping slaves from education produces a knowledge gap between slave and non-slave, but it doesn't reflect on the abilities of Africans to learn, were they to be given the opportunity, nor does it provide credit to the non-slave. In fact, it is a moral mark against them to be educated and be pro-slavery, and even for them not to be anti-slavery.

The abduction story is one of deception mingled with the threat of force. The first abductors are "several great ruffians," who show their guns and swords and threaten to kill them if they run away. But then they play the "good cop, bad cop" routine and one pretends to be friendly and starts the deception. After several transitions, he spends some time in a man's house, but then the descent into horror begins in earnest. He sees people in chains and spends time in prison hearing the "groans and cries of many."

Then he gets to the slave ship, where a suicide plot was hatched but ultimately foiled by the betrayal of a woman who had been taken into sexual slavery. Collective resistance and individual betrayal.

Cugoano skips the details of the tortures onboard the ship, saying they have been described often. The rhetoric here deserves study; why does he not detail the tortures? It could be that he is setting up his narrative voice as being passionate but relying upon the imagination and sympathy of his readers. He does say the scenes are "easier conceived than described."

He does however describe some of the tortures and terrorism on the islands, whipping, knocking-out or pulling teeth, and so on.

It is important to stress the word "torture" here I think. We underplay the horror of slavery when we say slaves were "punished," even if that is the vocabulary Cugoano uses. They were instead tortured in order to instill terror in the others; the key term here is "exemplary" punishments. This raises a big question: why are most people repulsed and sickened or terrorized by seeing torture while some others are able to torture people?

Next he distinguishes African slavery via war captivity or debt, but claims their treatment was far better than that of what we would call the "chattel" slaves who are bought and sold as commodities for work in the Americas.

Cugoano is brought to England however were he learned to read and write and acquired the Christian faith. He will use his learning, especially knowledge of Scriptures, in his fights with his pro-slavery enemies and their attempts to use Scripture to justify their actions.

The 1791 edition.

1. 1772 was the date of the Mansfield decision in Somerset case (Intro, x-xiii).
 - a. This did not technically abolish slavery, but did allow slaves to get a writ of habeas corpus to force master to bring him / her to court and stop forced deportation to islands. This was effectively the end of slavery in England however, as it allowed slaves to flee their masters with no threat of deportation.
 - b. The effect of the ruling shows that it's state force that ultimately backs individual slave owners. Slavery is a social-political system even if there are individual owners and slaves.
 - c. It also shows that the law can be a weapon in anti-slavery struggle.
 - d. Prior to the Mansfield decision there were networks of Africans and abolitionists in London; slaves were always running away, forming "Societies" or groups that encouraged and protected runaways (excerpt in Intro at xiii).
2. Cugoano was a radical for the time. He was an "emancipationist," who wanted freedom for slaves, that is, the end of slavery as an institution. Others were only after abolition of the slave trade.
 - a. He mentions the "mitigation of slavery" in the US after the Revolution (116). He's referring to the various laws in northern states that either abolished slavery or established a timetable of sorts for gradual emancipation. Let's use the example of New Jersey.
 - i. New Jersey's law of 1804 said that children of slaves born after July 4 that year would be free when reaching 21 and male children 25.
 - ii. In 1807 free blacks were disenfranchised in New Jersey.
 - iii. It was only in 1818 that New Jersey said slaves could not be sold to slave states. (Compare to the 1772 Mansfield decision.)
 - iv. It wasn't until 1848 that slavery was abolished in New Jersey.

- b. He also mentions the contradiction we saw Lemeul Haynes mention between the notion of liberty or freedom that was the rallying cry for the American Revolution and the continuance of slavery.
- 3. Cugoano mentions two arguments of his enemies, the supporters of slavery (117).
 - a. Slavery was established by God in the time of Moses, and subsequently has been widely practiced and for a long time
 - b. Africans are marked for slavery
- 4. Reason and revelation.
 - a. If you consult “the light of nature and the dictates of reason,” then you can mount a defense of the “universal natural rights and privileges of all men.”
 - i. This can be seen as a reference to a tradition of thought that grounds human rights in the state of nature. The idea is that if you can establish what rights humans have, as such, then you can see what rights they must have in any society.
 - ii. C will think that Scripture, rightly interpreted, accords with reason.
 - 1. The idea is that God has set up the world in a rational way and has endowed all humans with reason as the capacity to understand the natural law of the world.
 - 2. He has also revealed that law in Scripture.
 - b. If you only consult “human wisdom,” you are likely to err in considering if slavery is right or wrong.
 - i. If you don’t believe in Scripture, you have no reason citing it in defense of slavery.
 - ii. If you miss both Scripture and reason, then you are worse than ignorant in your picking and choosing Scripture to suit your case.
- 5. Unity of humanity. Theory of “monogenesis” says that humanity is one species due to a single origin (118-120).
 - a. Some believed in “polygenesis,” or multiple origins. (The distinction here doesn’t completely line up with pro and anti-slavery.)
 - b. If we are all one species, C continues, no color denotes inferiority, and so slavery as the creation of inferiority is unlawful.
 - c. In fact, different colors are proof of God’s providence, as they are adaptations to different climates.
- 6. Against the “curse” story, C shows there is no Biblical backing (120-124).
 - a. It couldn’t be from Cain, bcs the survivors have to be from Noah.
 - b. The people cursed in the Noah story are the Canaanites, not the Africans. The mark of Canaanites is their bad behavior, not a physical mark; some of them may have ended up in Cornwall where their being slavers is the mark of their iniquity.
 - c. Black Africans are from another, uncursed, part of Noah’s family.
- 7. Moses:
 - a. There was debt slavery in Moses’s time, but this wasn’t the terrible chattel slavery of modern times (124-127).
 - b. Symbolism.
 - i. There’s a complex notion of the symbolic (as opposed to providential climate adaptation) nature of colors. Just as black and white people cannot change their skin color just by will power, so can humans not change the blackness of the sinful souls without grace (129). That is to say, there is a sinful nature or original sin in each person that only grace can cleanse.

- ii. Ancient debt bondage can also be seen symbolically. It was permitted by God in order for it to be the external symbol of our inner bondage to sin (131-132).
- iii. So we, as graced, are like Israel, destined to be masters of our base carnal natures.
- iv. So the content of Mosaic law (slavery) is transformed into symbolic instruction for us modern people to have mastery over our sinful nature.

8. Modern day.

- a. The social contract is “free, voluntary, and sociable servitude, which is the very basis of human society” (140).
- b. But this has nothing to do with “taking away the natural liberties of men” in slavery; that is “injury and robbery contrary to all law.”
- c. Anti-slavery is war, because slavery is war: “the laws of God and man require that they [slavers] should be suppressed, and deprived of their liberty, or perhaps their lives.”
- d. That Africans are involved in the slave trade is no excuse for them or the Europeans; all slavers, European and African, should be punished (141).
- e. Revolution is justified, and slavers have no basis for complaints were it to happen.
- f. But God requires forgiveness; mercy should supersede equity in justice; you can’t make up for the injury of slavery by hurting the slavers (142).
- g. State authorities have a duty to protect, so they are responsible for not acting against the slave trade even if they are not personally or actively involved (143).