

POLITICAL WRITINGS OF
JOHN WESLEY

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THOUGHTS UPON SLAVERY [1774]

By slavery, I mean domestic slavery, or that of a servant to a master. A late ingenious writer well observes, 'The variety of forms in which slavery appears, makes it almost impossible to convey a just notion of it, by way of definition. There are, however, certain properties which have accompanied slavery in most places, whereby it is easily distinguished from that mild, domestic service which obtains in our country.'

Slavery imports an obligation of perpetual service, an obligation which only the consent of the master can dissolve. Neither in some countries can the master himself dissolve it, without the consent of judges appointed by the law. It generally gives the master an arbitrary power of any correction, not affecting life or limb. Sometimes even these are exposed to his will, or protected only by a fine, or some slight punishment, too inconsiderable to restrain a master of an harsh temper. It creates an incapacity of acquiring anything, except for the master's benefit. It allows the master to alienate the slave, in the same manner as his cows and horses. Lastly, it descends in its full extent from parent to child, even to the last generation.

The beginning of this may be dated from the remotest period of which we have an account in history. It commenced in the barbarous state of society, and in process of time spread into all nations. It prevailed particularly among the Jews, the Greeks, the Romans, and the ancient Germans; and was transmitted by them to the various kingdoms and states which arose out of the Roman Empire. But after Christianity prevailed, it gradually fell into decline in almost all parts of Europe. This great change began in Spain, about the end of the eighth century; and was become general in most other kingdoms of Europe, before the middle of the fourteenth.

From this time slavery was nearly extinct till the commencement of the sixteenth century, when the discovery of America, and of the western and eastern coasts of Africa, gave

^a Wesley's note: 'See Mr Hargreave's Plea for Somerset the Negro.'

occasion to the revival of it. It took its rise from the Portuguese, who, to supply the Spaniards with men to cultivate their new possessions in America, procured negroes from Africa, whom they sold for slaves to the American Spaniards. This began in the year 1508, when they imported the first negroes into Hispaniola. In 1540, Charles the Fifth, then King of Spain, determined to put an end to negro slavery; giving positive orders that all the negro slaves in the Spanish dominions should be set free. And this was accordingly done by Lagasca, whom he sent and empowered to free them all, on condition of continuing to labour for their masters. But soon after Lagasca returned to Spain, slavery returned and flourished as before. Afterwards, other nations, as they acquired possessions in America, followed the examples of the Spaniards; and slavery has taken deep root in most of our American colonies.

Such is the nature of slavery; such the beginning of negro slavery in America. But some may desire to know what kind of country it is from which the negroes are brought; what sort of men, of what temper and behaviour are they in their own country; and in what manner they are generally procured, carried to, and treated in, America.

And, first, what kind of country is that from whence they are brought? Is it so remarkably horrid, dreary, and barren, that it is a kindness to deliver them out of it? I believe many have apprehended so; but it is an entire mistake, if we may give credit to those who have lived many years therein, and could have no motive to misrepresent it.

That part of Africa whence the negroes are brought, commonly known by the name of Guinea, extends along the coast, in the whole, between three and four thousand miles. From the river Senegal, seventeen degrees north of the line, to Cape Sierra-Leone, it contains 700 miles. Thence it runs eastward about 1,500 miles, including the Grain Coast, the Ivory Coast, the Gold Coast, and the Slave Coast, with the large kingdom of Benin. From thence it runs southward, about 1,200 miles, and contains the kingdoms of Congo and Angola.²

² This paragraph is almost an exact transcription of a passage in Anthony Benezet, *Some Historical Account of Guinea. Its Situation, Produce and the General Disposition of its Inhabitants with an Inquiry into the Rise and Progress of the Slave Trade, Its Nature and Lamentable Effects* (London: J.

Concerning the first, the Senegal coast, Monsieur Brue, who lived there sixteen years, after describing its fruitfulness near the sea, says, 'The farther you go from the sea, the more fruitful and well-improved is the country, abounding in pulse, Indian corn, and various fruits. Here are vast meadows, which feed large herds of great and small cattle; and the villages, which lie thick, show the country is well peopled.' And again: 'I was surprised to see the land so well cultivated: scarce a spot lay unimproved; the low lands, divided by small canals, were all sowed with rice; the higher grounds were planted with Indian corn, and peas of different sorts. Their beef is excellent; poultry plenty, and very cheap, as are all the necessaries of life.'³

As to the Grain and Ivory Coast, we learn from eye-witnesses, that the soil is in general fertile, producing abundance of rice and roots. Indigo and cotton thrive without cultivation; fish is in great plenty; the flocks and herds are numerous, and the trees laden with fruit.

The Gold Coast and Slave Coast, all who have seen it agree, is exceeding fruitful and pleasant, producing vast quantities of rice and other grain, plenty of fruit and roots, palm wine and oil, and fish in great abundance, with much tame and wild cattle. The very same account is given us of the soil and produce of the kingdoms of Benin, Congo, and Angola. From all which it appears, that Guinea, in general, is far from an horrid, dreary, barren country — is one of the most fruitful, as well as the most pleasant, countries in the known world. It is said indeed to be unhealthy; and so it is to strangers, but perfectly healthy to the native inhabitants.

Such is the country from which the negroes are brought.

We come next to inquire what sort of men they are, of what temper and behaviour, not in our plantations; but in their native country. And here likewise the surest way is to take our account from eye and ear witnesses. Now, those who have lived in the Senegal country observe, it is inhabited by three nations, the Jalofs, Fulis, and Mandingos. The king of the Jalofs has under him several ministers, who assist in the exercise of justice. The chief justice goes in circuit through all his dominions, to hear

Phillips, 1771) see reprint of new edition 1788 (London: Frank Cass, 1968), 5.

³ Andrew Brue was Benezet's source, and these quotations are taken from Benezet, *op. cit.*, pp. 6-7.

complaints and determine controversies; and the viceroy goes with him, to inspect the behaviour of the alkadi, or governor, of each village. The Fulis are governed by their chief men, who rule with much moderation. Few of them will drink anything stronger than water, being strict Mahometans. The government is easy, because the people are of a quiet and good disposition, and so well instructed in what is right, that a man who wrongs another is the abomination of all. They desire no more land than they use, which they cultivate with great care and industry: If any of them are known to be made slaves by the white men, they all join to redeem them. They not only support all that are old, or blind, or lame among themselves, but have frequently supplied the necessities of the Mandingos, when they were distressed by famine.⁴

'The Mandingos,' says Monsieur Brue, 'are rigid Mahometans, drinking neither wine nor brandy. They are industrious and laborious, keeping their ground well cultivated, and breeding a good stock of cattle. Every town has a governor, and he appoints the labour of the people. The men work the ground designed for corn; the women and girls, the rice-ground. He afterwards divides the corn and rice among them; and decides all quarrels, if any arise. All the Mahometan negroes constantly go to public prayers thrice a day; there being a priest in every village, who regularly calls them together; and it is surprising to see the modesty, attention, and reverence which they observe during their worship. These three nations practise several trades; they have smiths, saddlers, potters, and weavers; and they are very ingenious at their several occupations. Their smiths not only make all the instruments of iron which they have occasion to use, but likewise work many things neatly in gold and silver. It is chiefly the women and children who weave fine cotton cloth, which they dye blue and black.'⁵

It was of these parts of Guinea that Monsieur Allanson, correspondent of the Royal Academy of Sciences at Paris, from 1749 to 1753, gives the following account, both as to the country and people: — 'Which way soever I turned my eyes, I beheld a

⁴ This description closely follows Francis Moor, *Travels into Distant Parts of Africa*, as quoted by Benezet, *op. cit.*, pp. 8–9. Much of Wesley's passage is direct quotation.

⁵ Benezet, *op. cit.*, pp. 10–11. The first part of the quotation is from Brue, but the latter part is from Jobson, in Astley's *Collection of Voyages*.

perfect image of pure nature: an agreeable solitude, bounded on every side by a charming landscape; the rural situation of cottages in the midst of trees; the ease and quietness of the negroes, reclined under the shade of the spreading foliage, with the simplicity of their dress and manners: the whole revived in my mind the idea of our first parents, and I seemed to contemplate the world in its primitive state. They are, generally speaking, very good-natured, sociable, and obliging. I was not a little pleased with my very first reception; and it fully convinced me, that there ought to be a considerable abatement made in the accounts we have of the savage character of the Africans.' He adds: 'It is amazing that an illiterate people should reason so pertinently concerning the heavenly bodies. There is no doubt, but that, with proper instruments, they would become excellent astronomers.'⁶

The inhabitants of the Grain and Ivory Coast are represented by those that deal with them, as sensible, courteous, and the fairest traders on the coasts of Guinea. They rarely drink to excess; if any do, they are severely punished by the king's order. They are seldom troubled with war: if a difference happen between two nations, they commonly end the dispute amicably.

The inhabitants of the Gold and Slave Coast likewise, when they are not artfully incensed against each other, live in great union and friendship, being generally well-tempered, civil, tractable, and ready to help any that need it. In particular, the natives of the kingdom of Whidah are civil, kind, and obliging to strangers; and they are the most gentleman-like of all the negroes, abounding in good manners toward each other. The inferiors pay the utmost respect to their superiors; so wives to their husbands, children to their parents. And they are remarkably industrious; all are constantly employed — the men in agriculture, the women in spinning and weaving cotton.

The Gold and Slave Coasts are divided into several districts, some governed by kings, others by the principal men, who take care each of their own town or village, and prevent or appease tumults. They punish murder and adultery severely; very frequently with death. Theft and robbery are punished by a fine proportionable to the goods that were taken. All the natives of this

⁶ Given by Benezet as M. Anderson, *Voyage to Senegal*. Benezet, *op. cit.*, pp. 13–14.

coast, though heathens, believe there is one God, the author of them and all things. They appear likewise to have a confused apprehension of a future state. And, accordingly, every town and village has a place of public worship. It is remarkable that they have no beggars among them; such is the care of the chief men, in every city and village, to provide some easy labour even for the old and weak. Some are employed in blowing the smiths' bellows; others in pressing palm-oil; others in grinding of colours. If they are too weak even for this, they sell provisions in the market.

The natives of the kingdom of Benin are a reasonable and good-natured people. They are sincere and inoffensive, and do no injustice either to one another or to strangers. They are eminently civil and courteous: if you make them a present, they endeavour to repay it double; and if they are trusted till the ship returns the next year, they are sure honestly to pay the whole debt. Theft is punished among them, although not with the same severity as murder. If a man and woman of any quality are taken in adultery, they are certain to be put to death, and their bodies thrown on a dunghill, and left a prey to wild beasts.⁷ They are punctually just and honest in their dealings; and are also very charitable, the king and the great lords taking care to employ all that are capable of any work. And those that are utterly helpless they keep for God's sake; so that here also are no beggars. The inhabitants of Congo and Angola are generally a quiet people. They discover a good understanding, and behave in a friendly manner to strangers, being of a mild temper and an affable carriage. Upon the whole, therefore, the negroes who inhabit the coast of Africa, from the river Senegal to the southern bounds of Angola, are so far from being the stupid, senseless, brutish, lazy barbarians, the fierce, cruel, perfidious savages they have been described, that, on the contrary, they are represented, by them who have no motive to flatter them, as remarkably sensible, considering the few advantages they have for improving their understanding; as industrious to the highest degree, perhaps more so than any other natives of so warm a climate; as fair, just, and honest in all their dealings, unless where white men have taught them to be otherwise; and as far more mild, friendly, and kind to strangers,

⁷ A direct quotation from John Barbot, *Description of Guinea*, in Benezet, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

than any of our forefathers were. *Our forefathers!* Where shall we find at this day, among the fair-faced natives of Europe, a nation generally practising the justice, mercy, and truth, which are found among these poor Africans? Suppose the preceding accounts are true, (which I see no reason or pretence to doubt of) and we may leave England and France, to seek genuine honesty in Benin, Congo, or Angola.

We have now seen what kind of country it is from which the negroes are brought; and what sort of men (even white men being the judges) they were in their own country. Inquire we, thirdly, in what manner are they generally procured, carried to, and treated in, America.

First, in what manner are they procured? Part of them by fraud. Captains of ships, from time to time, have invited negroes to come on board, and then carried them away. But far more have been procured by force. The Christians, landing upon their coasts, seized as many as they found, men, women, and children, and transported them to America. It was about 1551 that the English began trading to Guinea; at first, for gold and elephants' teeth; but soon after, for men. In 1556, Sir John Hawkins sailed with two ships to Cape Verd, where he sent eighty men on shore to catch negroes.⁸ But the natives flying, they fell farther down, and there set the men on shore, 'to burn their towns and take the inhabitants.' But they met with such resistance, that they had seven men killed, and took but ten negroes. So they went still farther down, till, having taken enough, they proceeded to the West Indies and sold them.⁹

It was some time before the Europeans found a more compendious way of procuring African slaves, by prevailing upon them to make war upon each other, and to sell their prisoners. Till then they seldom had any wars; but were in general quiet and peaceable. But the white men first taught them drunkenness and avarice, and then hired them to sell one another. Nay, by this means, even their kings are induced to sell their own subjects. So Mr Moore, factor of the African Company in 1730, informs us:

⁸ Sir John Hawkins (1532–1595), a kinsman of Sir Francis Drake, known to history as the first English slave-trader. This account is quoted from the *Naval Chronicles* by Benezet, *op. cit.*, pp. 48–9.

⁹ The quotations from Moor, Brue and Barbot are adapted from Benezet, *Guinea*, pp. 89–98.

'When the king of Barsaili wants goods or brandy, he sends to the English governor at James's Fort, who immediately sends a sloop. Against the time it arrives, he plunders some of his neighbours' towns, selling the people for the goods he wants. At other times he falls upon one of his own towns, and makes bold to sell his own subjects.' So Monsieur Brue says, 'I wrote to the king,' (not the same) 'if he had a sufficient number of slaves, I would treat with him. He seized 300 of his own people, and sent word he was ready to deliver them for the goods.' He adds: 'Some of the natives are always ready' (when well paid) 'to surprise and carry off their own countrymen. They come at night without noise, and if they find any lone cottage, surround it and carry off all the people.' Barbot, another French factor, says, 'Many of the slaves sold by the negroes are prisoners of war, or taken in the incursions they make into their enemies' territories. Others are stolen. Abundance of little blacks, of both sexes; are stolen away by their neighbours, when found abroad on the road, or in the woods, or else in the corn-fields, at the time of year when their parents keep them there all day to scare away the devouring birds.' That their own parents sell them is utterly false: whites, not blacks, are without natural affection!¹⁰

To set the manner wherein negroes are procured in a yet stronger light, it will suffice to give an extract of '*Two Voyages to Guinea*' on this account. The first is taken verbatim¹¹ from the original manuscript of the surgeon's journal: — 'Sestro, Dec. 29, 1724 — No trade to-day, though many traders came on board. They informed us, that the people are gone to war within land, and will bring prisoners enough in two or three days; in hopes of which we stay.

'The 30th — No trade yet; but our traders came on board to-day, and informed us the people had burnt four towns; so that tomorrow we expect slaves off.

'The 31st — Fair weather; but no trading yet. We see each night towns burning. But we hear many of the Sestro men are killed by the inland negroes; so that we fear this war will be unsuccessful.

'The 2nd of January — Last night we saw a prodigious fire break out about eleven o'clock, and this morning see the town of

¹⁰ Despite his objection to their atheism, Wesley sometimes reflected the influence of Enlightenment authors like Rousseau.

¹¹ Wesley's account is taken verbatim from Benezet, *op. cit.*, pp. 99–100.

Sestro burned down to the ground.' (It contained some hundred houses.) 'So that we find their enemies are too hard for them at present, and consequently our trade spoiled here. Therefore about seven o'clock we weighed anchor, to proceed lower down.'

The second extract, taken from the journal of a surgeon, who went from New York on the same trade, is as follows: 'The commander of the vessel sent to acquaint the king, that he wanted a cargo of slaves. The king promised to furnish him; and, in order to it, set out, designing to surprise some town, and make all the people prisoners. Some time after, the king sent him word, he had not yet met with the desired success; having attempted to break up two towns, but having been twice repulsed; but that he still hoped to procure the number of slaves. In this design he persisted, till he met his enemies in the field. A battle was fought, which lasted three days. And the engagement was so bloody, that 4,500 men were slain upon the spot.¹² 'Such is the manner wherein the negroes are procured! Thus the Christians preach the Gospel to the heathens!

Thus they are procured. But in what numbers and in what manner are they carried to America? Mr Anderson, in his *History of Trade and Commerce*, observes: 'England supplies her American colonies with negro slaves, amounting in number to about 100,000 every year;¹³ that is, so many are taken on board our ships; but at least 10,000 of them die in the voyage; about a fourth part more die at the different islands, in what is called the seasoning. So that at an average, in the passage and seasoning together, 30,000 die; that is, properly, are murdered. O Earth, O Sea, cover not thou their blood!

When they are brought down to the shore in order to be sold, our surgeons thoroughly examine them, and that quite naked, women and men, without any distinction; those that are approved are set on one side. In the mean time, a burning-iron, with the arms or name of the company, lies in the fire, with which they are marked on the breast. Before they are put into the ships, their masters strip them of all they have on their backs: so that they come on board stark naked, women as well as men. It is common for several hundred of them to be put on board one vessel, where

¹² Benezet, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

¹³ Quoted by Benezet, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

they are stowed together in as little room as it is possible for them to be crowded. It is easy to suppose what a condition they must soon be in, between heat, thirst, and stench of various kinds. So that it is no wonder, so many should die in the passage; but rather, that any survive it.

When the vessels arrive at their destined port, the negroes are again exposed naked to the eyes of all that flock together, and the examination of their purchasers. Then they are separated to the plantations of their several masters, to see each other no more. Here you may see mothers hanging over their daughters, bedewing their naked breasts with tears, and daughters clinging to their parents, till the whipper soon obliges them to part. And what can be more wretched than the condition they then enter upon? Banished from their country, from their friends and relations for ever, from every comfort of life, they are reduced to a state scarce anyway preferable to that of beasts of burden. In general, a few roots, not of the nicest kind, usually yams or potatoes, are their food; and two rags, that neither screen them from the heat of the day, nor the cold of the night, their covering. Their sleep is very short, their labour continual, and frequently above their strength; so that death sets many of them at liberty before they have lived out half their days. The time they work in the West Indies, is from day-break to noon, and from two o'clock till dark; during which time, they are attended by overseers, who, if they think them dilatory, or think anything not so well done as it should be, whip them most unmercifully, so that you may see their bodies long after wealed and scarred usually from the shoulders to the waist. And before they are suffered to go to their quarters, they have commonly something to do, as collecting herbage for the horses, or gathering fuel for the boilers; so that it is often past twelve before they can get home. Hence, if their food is not prepared, they are sometimes called to labour again, before they can satisfy their hunger. And no excuse will avail. If they are not in the field immediately, they must expect to feel the lash. Did the creator intend that the noblest creatures in the visible world should live such a life as this?

Are these thy glorious work, Parent of Good?

As to the punishments inflicted on them, says Sir Hans Sloane, 'they frequently geld them, or chop off half a foot: after they are whipped till they are raw all over, some put pepper and salt upon

them; some drop melted wax upon their skin; others cut off their ears, and constrain them to broil and eat them. For rebellion,' (that is, asserting their native liberty, which they have as much right to as to the air they breathe) 'they fasten them down to the ground with crooked sticks on every limb, and then applying fire, by degrees, to the feet and hands, they burn them gradually upward to the head.'¹⁴

But will not the laws made in the plantations prevent or redress all cruelty and oppression? We will take but a few of those laws for a specimen, and then let any man judge: — in order to rivet the chain of slavery, the law of Virginia ordains: 'That no slave shall be set free upon any pretence whatever, except for some meritorious services, to be adjudged and allowed by the governor and council; and that where any slave shall be set free by his owner, otherwise than is herein directed, the churchwardens of the parish, wherein such negro shall reside for the space of one month, are hereby authorized and required to take up and sell the said negro by public outcry.

Will not these lawgivers take effectual care to prevent cruelty and oppression? The law of Jamaica ordains: 'Every slave that shall run away, and continue absent from his master twelve months, shall be deemed rebellious.' And by another law, fifty pounds are allowed to those who kill or bring in alive a rebellious slave. So their law treats these poor men with as little ceremony and consideration, as if they were merely brute beasts! But the innocent blood which is shed in consequence of such a detestable law, must call for vengeance on the murderous abettors and actors of such deliberate wickedness.

But the law of Barbadoes exceeds even this: 'If any negro under punishment, by his master, or his order, for running away, or any other crime or misdemeanor, shall suffer in life or member, no person whatsoever shall be liable to any fine therefore. But if any man, of wantonness, or only of bloody-mindedness, or cruel intention, wilfully kill a negro of his own,' (now, observe the severe punishment!) 'he shall pay into the public treasury fifteen pounds sterling! And not be liable to any other punishment or forfeiture for the same!'¹⁵

¹⁴ Hans Sloane, *Natural History of Jamaica*, as quoted by Benezet, *op. cit.*, pp. 75-6.

¹⁵ Benezet, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

Nearly allied to this is that law of Virginia: 'After proclamation is issued against slaves that run away, it is lawful for any person whatsoever to kill and destroy such slaves, by such ways and means as he shall think fit.'¹⁶

We have seen already some of the ways and means which have been thought fit on such occasions; and many more might be mentioned. One gentleman, when I was abroad, thought fit to roast his slave alive! But if the most natural act of 'running away' from intolerable tyranny, deserves such relentless severity, what punishment have these lawmakers to expect hereafter, on account of their own enormous offences?

This is the plain, unaggravated matter of fact. Such is the manner wherein our African slaves are procured; such the manner wherein they are removed from their native land, and wherein they are treated in our plantations. I would now inquire, whether these things can be defended, on the principles of even heathen honesty; whether they can be reconciled (setting the Bible out of the question) with any degree of either justice or mercy.

The grand plea is, 'they are authorized by law.' But can law, human law, change the nature of things? Can it turn darkness into light, or evil into good? By no means. Notwithstanding 10,000 laws, right is right, and wrong is wrong still. There must still remain an essential difference between justice and injustice, cruelty and mercy. So that I still ask, who can reconcile this treatment of the negroes, first and last, with either mercy or justice?

Where is the justice of inflicting the severest evils on those that have done us no wrong? Of depriving those that never injured us in word or deed, of every comfort of life? Of tearing them from their native country, and depriving them of liberty itself, to which an Angolan has the same natural right as an Englishman, and on which he sets as high a value? Yea, where is the justice of taking away the lives of innocent, inoffensive men; murdering thousands of them in their own land, by the hands of their own countrymen; many thousands, year after year, on shipboard, and then casting them like dung into the sea; and tens of thousands in that cruel slavery to which they are so unjustly reduced?

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

But waving, for the present, all other considerations, I strike at the root of this complicated villany; I absolutely deny all slave-holding to be consistent with any degree of natural justice. I cannot place this in a clearer light than that great ornament of his profession, Judge Blackstone, has already done. Part of his words are as follows: — 'The three origins of the right of slavery assigned by Justinian, are all built upon false foundations: (1) slavery is said to arise from captivity in war. The conqueror having a right to the life of his captives, if he spares that, has then a right to deal with them as he pleases. But this is untrue, if taken generally, — that, by the laws of nations, a man has a right to kill his enemy. He has only a right to kill him in particular cases, in cases of absolute necessity for self-defence. And it is plain, this absolute necessity did not subsist, since he did not kill him, but made him prisoner. War itself is justifiable only on principles of self-preservation: therefore it gives us no right over prisoners, but to hinder their hurting us by confining them. Much less can it give a right to torture, or kill, or even to enslave an enemy when the war is over. Since therefore the right of making our prisoners slaves, depends on a supposed right of slaughter, that foundation failing, the consequence which is drawn from it must fail likewise.

'It is said, secondly, slavery may begin by one man's selling himself to another. And it is true, a man may sell himself to work for another; but he cannot sell himself to be a slave, as above defined. Every sale implies an equivalent given to the seller, in lieu of what he transfers to the buyer. But what equivalent can be given for life or liberty? His property likewise, with the very price which he seems to receive, devolves *ipso facto* to his master, the instant he becomes his slave: in this case, therefore, the buyer gives nothing, and the seller receives nothing. Of what validity then can a sale be, which destroys the very principle upon which all sales are founded?

'We are told, thirdly, that men may be born slaves, by being the children of slaves. But this, being built upon the two former rights, must fall together with them. If neither captivity nor contract can, by the plain law of nature and reason, reduce the parent to a state of slavery, much less can they reduce the offspring.' It clearly follows, that all slavery is as irreconcilable to justice as to mercy.

That slave-holding is utterly inconsistent with mercy, is almost too plain to need a proof. Indeed, it is said, 'that these negroes

being prisoners of war, our captains and factors buy them, merely to save them from being put to death. And is not this mercy?' I answer, (1) did Sir John Hawkins, and many others, seize upon men, women, and children, who were at peace in their own fields or houses, merely to save them from death?; (2) was it to save them from death, that they knocked out the brains of those they could not bring away?; (3) who occasioned and fomented those wars, wherein these poor creatures were taken prisoners? Who excited them by money, by drink, by every possible means, to fall upon one another? Was it not themselves?

They know in their own conscience it was, if they have any conscience left. But, (4) to bring the matter to a short issue, can they say before God, that they ever took a single voyage, or bought a single negro, from this motive? They cannot; they well know, to get money, not to save lives, was the whole and sole spring of their motions.

But if this manner of procuring and treating negroes is not consistent either with mercy or justice, yet there is a plea for it which every man of business will acknowledge to be quite sufficient. Fifty years ago, one meeting an eminent statesman in the lobby of the House of Commons, said, 'You have been long talking about justice and equity. Pray which is this bill; equity or justice?' He answered very short and plain, 'D—n justice; it is necessity.' Here also the slave-holder fixes his foot; here he rests the strength of his cause. 'If it is not quite right, yet it must be so; there is an absolute necessity for it. It is necessary we should procure slaves; and when we have procured them, it is necessary to use them with severity, considering their stupidity, stubbornness, and wickedness.'

I answer, you stumble at the threshold; I deny that villany is ever necessary. It is impossible that it should ever be necessary for any reasonable creature to violate all the laws of justice, mercy, and truth. No circumstances can make it necessary for a man to burst in sunder all the ties of humanity. It can never be necessary for a rational being to sink himself below a brute. A man can be under no necessity of degrading himself into a wolf. The absurdity of the supposition is so glaring, that one would wonder any one can help seeing it.

This in general. But, to be more particular, I ask, first, what is necessary? And, secondly, to what end? It may be answered, 'the

whole method now used by the original purchasers of negroes is necessary to the furnishing our colonies yearly with 100,000 slaves.' I grant, this is necessary to that end. But how is that end necessary? How will you prove it necessary that one hundred, that one, of those slaves should be procured? 'Why, it is necessary to my gaining 100,000 pounds.' Perhaps so: but how is this necessary? It is very possible you might be both a better and a happier man, if you had not a quarter of it. I deny that your gaining 1,000 is necessary either to your present or eternal happiness. 'But, however, you must allow, these slaves are necessary for the cultivation of our islands; inasmuch as white men are not able to labour in hot climates.' I answer, first, it were better that all those islands should remain uncultivated for ever; yea, it were more desirable that they were altogether sunk in the depth of the sea, than that they should be cultivated at so high a price as the violation of justice, mercy, and truth. But, secondly, the supposition on which you ground your argument is false. For white men, even Englishmen, are well able to labour in hot climates; provided they are temperate both in meat and drink, and that they inure themselves to it by degrees. I speak no more than I know by experience. It appears from the thermometer, that the summer heat in Georgia is frequently equal to that in Barbadoes, yea, to that under the line. And yet I and my family (eight in number) did employ all our spare time there, in felling of trees and clearing of ground, as hard labour as any negro need be employed in. The German family, likewise, forty in number, were employed in all manner of labour. And this was so far from impairing our health, that we all continued perfectly well, while the idle ones round about us were swept away as with a pestilence. It is not true, therefore, that white men are not able to labour, even in hot climates, full as well as black. But if they were not, it would be better that none should labour there, that the work should be left undone, than that myriads of innocent men should be murdered, and myriads more dragged into the basest slavery.

'But the furnishing us with slaves is necessary for the trade, and wealth, and glory of our nation.' Here are several mistakes. For, first, wealth is not necessary to the glory of any nation; but wisdom, virtue, justice, mercy, generosity, public spirit, love of our country. These are necessary to the real glory of a nation; but abundance of wealth is not. Men of understanding allow that the

glory of England was full as high in Queen Elizabeth's time as it is now; although our riches and trade were then as much smaller, as our virtue was greater. But, secondly, it is not clear that we should have either less money or trade, (only less of that detestable trade of man-stealing) if there was not a negro in all our islands, or in all English America. It is demonstrable, white men, inured to it by degrees, can work as well as them; and they would do it, were negroes out of the way, and proper encouragement given them. However, thirdly, I come back to the same point: better no trade, than trade procured by villany. It is far better to have no wealth, than to gain wealth at the expense of virtue. Better is honest poverty, than all the riches bought by the tears, and sweat, and blood, of our fellow-creatures.

'However this be, it is necessary, when we have slaves, to use them with severity.' What, to whip them for every petty offence, till they are all in gore blood? To take that opportunity of rubbing pepper and salt into their raw flesh? To drop burning sealing-wax upon their skin? To castrate them? To cut off half their foot with an axe? To hang them on gibbets, that they may die by inches, with heat, and hunger, and thirst? To pin them down to the ground, and then burn them by degrees, from the feet to the head? To roast them alive? When did a Turk or a heathen find it necessary to use a fellow-creature thus?

I pray, to what end is this usage necessary? 'Why, to prevent their running away; and to keep them constantly to their labour, that they may not idle away their time: so miserably stupid is this race of men, yea, so stubborn, and so wicked.' Allowing them to be as stupid as you say, to whom is that stupidity owing? Without question, it lies altogether at the door of their inhuman masters; who give them no means, no opportunity, of improving their understanding; and, indeed, leave them no motive, either from hope or fear, to attempt any such thing. They were no way remarkable for stupidity while they remained in their own country: the inhabitants of Africa, where they have equal motives and equal means of improvement, are not inferior to the inhabitants of Europe; to some of them they are greatly superior. Impartially survey, in their own country, the natives of Benin, and the natives of Lapland; compare (setting prejudice aside) the Samoeids and the Angolans; and on which side does the advantage lie, in point of understanding? Certainly the African is in no respect inferior to

the European. Their stupidity, therefore, in our plantations is not natural; otherwise than it is the natural effect of their condition. Consequently, it is not their fault, but yours: you must answer for it, before God and man.

'But their stupidity is not the only reason of our treating them with severity. For it is hard to say, which is the greatest, this, or their stubbornness and wickedness.' It may be so: but do not these, as well as the other, lie at your door? Are not stubbornness, cunning, pilfering, and divers other vices, the natural, necessary fruits of slavery? Is not this an observation which has been made in every age and nation? And what means have you used to remove this stubbornness? Have you tried what mildness and gentleness would do? I knew one that did; that had prudence and patience to make the experiment; Mr Hugh Bryan, who then lived on the borders of South Carolina. And what was the effect? Why, that all his negroes (and he had no small number of them) loved and revered him as a father, and cheerfully obeyed him out of love. Yea, they were more afraid of a frown from him, than of many blows from an overseer. And what pains have you taken, what method have you used, to reclaim them from their wickedness? Have you carefully taught them, that there is a God, a wise, powerful, merciful being, the creator and governor of heaven and earth? that he has appointed a day wherein he will judge the world, will take an account of all our thoughts, words, and actions? That in that day he will reward every child of man according to his works? That then the righteous shall inherit the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world; and the wicked shall be cast into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels? If you have not done this, if you have taken no pains or thought about the matter, can you wonder at their wickedness? What wonder, if they should cut your throat? And if they did, whom could you thank for it but yourself? You first acted the villain in making them slaves, whether you stole them or bought them. You kept them stupid and wicked, by cutting them off from all opportunities of improving either in knowledge or virtue: and now you assign their want of wisdom and goodness as the reason for using them worse than brute beasts!

It remains only to make a little application of the preceding observations. But to whom should that application be made? That may bear a question. Should we address ourselves to the public at

large? What effect can this have? It may inflame the world against the guilty, but is not likely to remove that guilt. Should we appeal to the English nation in general? This also is striking wide; and is never likely to procure any redress for the sore evil we complain of. As little would it in all probability avail, to apply to the parliament. So many things, which seem of greater importance, lie before them, that they are not likely to attend to this. I therefore add a few words to those who are more immediately concerned, whether captains, merchants, or planters.

And, first, to the captains employed in this trade. Most of you know the country of Guinea; several parts of it, at least, between the river Senegal and the kingdom of Angola. Perhaps, now, by your means part of it is become a dreary, uncultivated wilderness, the inhabitants being all murdered or carried away, so that there are none left to till the ground. But you well know how populous, how fruitful, how pleasant it was a few years ago. You know, the people were not stupid, not wanting, in sense, considering the few means of improvement they enjoyed. Neither did you find them savage, fierce, cruel, treacherous, or unkind to strangers. On the contrary, they were, in most parts, a sensible and ingenious people. They were kind and friendly, courteous and obliging, and remarkably fair and just in their dealings. Such are the men whom you hire their own countrymen to tear away from this lovely country; part by stealth, part by force, part made captives in those wars which you raise or foment on purpose. You have seen them torn away — children from their parents, parents from their children; husbands from their wives, wives from their beloved husbands, brethren and sisters from each other. You have dragged them who had never done you any wrong, perhaps in chains, from their native shore. You have forced them into your ships like an herd of swine, — them who had souls immortal as your own; only some of them leaped into the sea, and resolutely stayed under water, till they could suffer no more from you. You have stowed them together as close as ever they could lie, without any regard either to decency or convenience. And when many of them had been poisoned by foul air, or had sunk under various hardships, you have seen their remains delivered to the deep, till the sea should give up his dead. You have carried the survivors into the vilest slavery, never to end but with life; such slavery as is not

found among the Turks at Algiers, no, nor among the heathens in America.

May I speak plainly to you? I must. Love constrains me; love to you, as well as to those you are concerned with. Is there a God? You know there is. Is he a just God? Then there must be a state of retribution; a state wherein the just God will reward every man according to his works. Then what reward will he render to you? O think betimes! Before you drop into eternity! Think now, 'He shall have judgment without mercy that showed no mercy.'

Are you a man? Then you should have an human heart. But have you indeed? What is your heart made of? Is there no such principle as compassion there? Do you never feel another's pain? Have you no sympathy, no sense of human woe, no pity for the miserable? When you saw the flowing eyes, the heaving breasts, or the bleeding sides and tortured limbs of your fellow-creatures, was you a stone, or a brute? Did you look upon them with the eyes of a tiger? When you squeezed the agonizing creatures down in the ship, or when you threw their poor mangled remains into the sea, had you no relenting? Did not one tear drop from your eye, one sigh escape from your breast? Do you feel no relenting now? If you do not, you must go on, till the measure of your iniquities is full. Then will the great God deal with you as you have dealt with them, and require all their blood at your hands. And at 'that day it shall be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah than for you!' But if your heart does relent, though in a small degree, know it is a call from the God of love. And 'to-day, if you will hear his voice, harden not your heart.' To-day resolve, God being your helper, to escape for your life. Regard not money! All that a man hath will he give for his life! Whatever you lose, lose not your soul: nothing can countervail that loss. Immediately quit the horrid trade: at all events, be an honest man.

This equally concerns every merchant who is engaged in the slave-trade. It is you that induce the African villain to sell his countrymen; and in order thereto, to steal, rob, murder men, women, and children without number, by enabling the English villain to pay him for so doing, whom you overpay for his execrable labour. It is your money that is the spring of all, that empowers him to go on: so that whatever he or the African does in this matter is all your act and deed. And is your conscience quite reconciled to this? Does it never reproach you at all? Has gold

entirely blinded your eyes, and stupified your heart? Can you see, can you feel, no harm therein? Is it doing as you would be done to? Make the case your own. 'Master,' said a slave at Liverpool to the merchant that owned him, 'what, if some of my countrymen were to come here, and take away my mistress, and master Tommy, and master Billy, and carry them into our country, and make them slaves, how would you like it?' His answer was worthy of a man: 'I will never buy a slave more while I live.' O let his resolution be yours! Have no more any part in this detestable business. Instantly leave it to those unfeeling wretches,

Who laugh at human nature and compassion! Be you a man, not a wolf, a devourer of the human species! Be merciful, that you may obtain mercy!

And this equally concerns every gentleman that has an estate in our American plantations; yea, all slave-holders, of whatever rank and degree; seeing men-buyers are exactly on a level with men-stealers. Indeed you say, 'I pay honestly for my goods; and I am not concerned to know how they are come by.' Nay, but you are; you are deeply concerned to know they are honestly come by. Otherwise you are a partaker with a thief, and are not a jot honestier than him. But you know they are not honestly come by; you know they are procured by means nothing near so innocent as picking of pockets, house-breaking, or robbery upon the highway. You know they are procured by a deliberate series of more complicated villany (of fraud, robbery, and murder) than was ever practised either by Mahometans or pagans; in particular, by murders, of all kinds; by the blood of the innocent poured upon the ground like water. Now, it is your money that pays the merchant, and through him the captain and the African butchers. You therefore are guilty, yea, principally guilty, of all these frauds, robberies, and murders. You are the spring that puts all the rest in motion; they would not stir a step without you; therefore, the blood of all these wretches who die before their time, whether in their country or elsewhere, lies upon your head. 'The blood of thy brother' (for, whether thou wilt believe it or no, such he is in the sight of him that made him) 'crieth against thee from the earth,' from the ship, and from the waters. O, whatever it costs, put a stop to its cry before it be too late: instantly, at any price, were it the half of your goods, deliver thyself from blood-guiltiness! Thy hands, thy bed, thy furniture, thy house, thy lands, are at present

stained with blood. Surely it is enough; accumulate no more guilt; spill no more the blood of the innocent! Do not hire another to shed blood; do not pay him for doing it! Whether you are a Christian or no, show yourself a man! Be not more savage than a lion or a bear!

Perhaps you will say, 'I do not buy any negroes; I only use those left me by my father.' So far is well; but is it enough to satisfy your own conscience? Had your father, have you, has any man living, a right to use another as a slave? It cannot be, even setting revelation aside. It cannot be, that either war, or contract, can give any man such a property in another as he has in his sheep and oxen. Much less is it possible, that any child of man should ever be born a slave. Liberty is the right of every human creature, as soon as he breathes the vital air; and no human law can deprive him of that right which he derives from the law of nature.

If, therefore, you have any regard to justice, (to say nothing of mercy, nor the revealed law of God) render unto all their due. Give liberty to whom liberty is due, that is, to every child of man, to every partaker of human nature. Let none serve you but by his own act and deed, by his own voluntary choice. Away with all whips, all chains, all compulsion! Be gentle toward all men; and see that you invariably do unto every one as you would he should do unto you.

Thou God of love, thou who art loving to every man, and whose mercy is over all thy works; thou who art the father of the spirits of all flesh, and who art rich in mercy unto all; thou who hast mingled of one blood all the nations upon earth; have compassion upon these outcasts of men, who are trodden down as dung upon the earth! Arise, and help these that have no helper, whose blood is spilt upon the ground like water! Are not these also the work of thine own hands, the purchase of thy Son's blood? Stir them up to cry unto thee in the land of their captivity; and let their complaint come up before thee; let it enter into thy ears! Make even those that lead them away captive to pity them, and turn their captivity as the rivers in the south. O burst thou all their chains in sunder; more especially the chains of their sins! Thou saviour of all, make them free, that they may be free indeed!¹⁷

¹⁷ John Wesley's *Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists* (London: John Mason, 1779) no. 444. The appeal to religion is kept to the end of this tract, which mostly relies on humane principles of

The servile progeny of Ham
Seize as the purchase of thy blood!
Let all the heathens know thy name
From idols to the living God
The dark Americans convert,
And shine in every pagan heart!

Enlightenment philosophy. For Wesley as an intellectual child of the Enlightenment, see eg. J. W. Haas, Jr, 'John Wesley's Views on Science and Christianity: An Examination of the Charge of Anti-Science', *Church History*, vol. 63 (1974), pp. 378-92; Richard E. Brantley, 'The Common Ground of Wesley and Edwards', *Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 83 (1990), pp. 271-303; John C. English, 'John Wesley's Indebtedness to John Norris', *Church History*, vol. 60 (1991), pp. 55-69.