

THE EFFECTS OF SLAVERY ON ENSLAVED PEOPLE AND EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ANTISLAVERY ARGUMENTS

JULIA JORATI 

Philosophy, University of Massachusetts Amherst

Many antislavery authors in the eighteenth century contend that enslavement degrades the human mind and causes enslaved people to exhibit inferior moral or intellectual traits. They often use this contention to combat the racist claim that Black people are naturally inferior to Whites and that this natural inferiority justifies enslavement, insisting instead that the disparity is simply an effect of enslavement. After examining this argumentative strategy and what makes it appealing, this paper investigates several ways in which it is problematic. First, this strategy was sometimes used to oppose the immediate abolition of slavery: some eighteenth-century authors argue that many enslaved people have become incapable of living good lives outside of slavery and that immediate emancipation would therefore be detrimental for them and for society. Moreover, this strategy may further marginalize and demonize an already oppressed group and it sometimes blames, or seems to blame, enslaved people for their condition. The paper ends with some reflections on whether the strategy can nevertheless be useful for antislavery purposes.

Keywords: slavery; moral damage; effects of oppression; race; racism; antislavery; proslavery; early modern philosophy; Europe; America

Contact: Julia Jorati <jjorati@umass.edu>

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1. Introduction

Eighteenth-century authors who oppose transatlantic slavery use a large variety of argumentative strategies, drawing among other things on ideas from natural law ethics, Christian theology, moral sense theory, economics, self-interest, and common-sense principles. They also theorize about race, often in order to refute the racist doctrine that Black people are naturally inferior to White people and that this inferiority justifies transatlantic slavery. One of the most popular strategies for refuting this doctrine is what I call the effects-of-slavery strategy, which will be my focus here. According to this strategy, the inferiority invoked in proslavery arguments is merely an effect of life in slavery. There is no racial or natural inferiority that could justify the enslavement of Black people; there is merely a contingent, unnatural inferiority that results from enslavement. This unnatural and acquired inferiority cannot be used to justify transatlantic slavery, according to proponents of this strategy. Quite to the contrary: the fact that slavery has such horrendous effects on enslaved people is among the reasons that make it morally atrocious.

As I will show in this paper, there are many different versions of the effects-of-slavery strategy in eighteenth-century texts. Different authors provide different accounts of the effects that enslavement has on the minds and characters of enslaved people and different explanations of why enslavement has these effects. We will also see that this strategy was enormously popular. It is easy to see why it would have appealed to so many antislavery authors. Yet I will also show that the strategy can be deeply problematic. Among other things, it can reinforce racist stereotypes while also demonizing and othering enslaved people. In addition, it can be used as an excuse to delay the abolition of slavery.

Examining the effects-of-slavery strategy and its shortcomings is important for several reasons. One reason is its centrality to the history of debates about slavery and the history of race and racism. Scrutinizing examples of this strategy from the eighteenth century allows us to gain a deeper understanding of how people in this period thought about racial slavery and about race more generally. That in turn is worthwhile both because it is central to eighteenth-century philosophy and because it has shaped the racial discourse in subsequent centuries.

Another reason is that the effects-of-slavery strategy is an instance of a more general argumentative strategy that is often used today to explain various disparities between demographic groups—for instance, achievement gaps and differences in crime rates between racial groups or genders within a society, or gaps between the GDPs in different parts of the world. One common antiracist, feminist, and anti-colonial explanation for such disparities is that they result not from a natural inferiority of the underachieving groups but rather from external factors such as oppression, discrimination, exclusion, and other forms

of systemic injustice.¹ Because the effects-of-slavery strategy is an instance of this general type of explanation, it can serve as a potentially useful case study.² Examining the benefits and dangers of this historical strategy may help us determine whether and how to employ the more general explanatory strategy today.

To explore instances of the effects-of-slavery strategy from the eighteenth century, I will start in section 2 with some important background about the context in which this strategy was typically used. Then, in section 3—which will take up a large portion of this paper—I explore some of the most instructive examples of this strategy from the eighteenth century. Many of the texts that I will discuss were composed in North America, or more specifically, in the United States and its predecessor colonies. Yet the strategy was also common in European antislavery texts, and I will mention a few such texts as well. In sections 4 and 5, I then examine the benefits and dangers of this strategy, before concluding with some brief reflections on what we can learn from this case study.

2. Background

The effects-of-slavery strategy is an antislavery strategy claiming that if enslaved Black people are inferior to White people in their moral or intellectual traits, this inferiority is merely an effect of their enslavement. This strategy is typically used to target a racist doctrine that I call ‘racial natural slavery,’ which is a racialized version of the doctrine of natural slavery. Natural slavery, in turn, goes back at least to Aristotle, who claims in his *Politics* that some people are natural slaves, who are “from the hour of their birth . . . marked out for

1. Natural differences—in the sense of innate differences in mental or physical traits—appear to play a less central role in oppressive ideologies after the Second World War than they did in the preceding centuries. These more recent ideologies often focus on an alleged cultural inferiority rather than a natural one (see Fanon 2006: 20; Alcoff 2023). I thank Lidal Dror and John Harfouch for suggesting that I mention this. However, these alleged cultural differences often function quite similarly to natural differences in oppressive ideologies (Fredrickson 2015: 4–8). As a result, the same argumentative strategies—such as the strategy I examine in this paper—might sometimes be useful for undermining them. For instance, someone could argue that members of a racialized minority group are incarcerated at higher rates not because of the group’s culture but rather because of various forms of oppression. Alternatively, someone could argue that cultural differences cause this disparity but that these cultural differences are themselves the effects of oppression. Lessons from our eighteenth-century case study might hence be applicable to argumentative strategies in the twenty-first century, even if oppressive ideologies today rely much less on natural differences.

2. Another important case study from the early modern period are debates about gender: early modern proponents of women’s equality often argue that the traits that allegedly make women inferior to men and justify their subordination are simply effects of their social disadvantages. One prominent author who employs this strategy is Mary Astell (*A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, Part 1 [1694], 2002: 57–60).

subjection” (i.5, 1984: 1990). What marks out these individuals for subjection, according to Aristotle, is a set of natural psychological and physiological characteristics that make them unfit for life as a free person and suited only for enslavement. Indeed, he argues that these traits make it “expedient and right” for these individuals to be enslaved (i.5, 1984: 1991). Among the psychological traits that Aristotle ascribes to natural slaves is a lack of foresight, or an inability to anticipate, or plan for, the future (i.2, 1984: 1986–7). This makes them suited for slavery because they require the direction of someone who can make plans. In addition, Aristotle claims that a natural slave “participates in reason enough to apprehend, but not to have” (i.5, 1984: 1990). By this, Aristotle presumably means that natural slaves can understand the master’s practical reasoning but are unable to engage in practical reasoning themselves. He confirms this in a later chapter: the natural slave “has no deliberative faculty at all” (i.13, 1984: 1999); that is, the natural slave cannot reason practically or rationally determine the best course of action.

It is controversial whether Aristotle thought about natural slavery in a racial way,³ but early modern authors clearly did. The claim that Black people are natural slaves plays a major role in eighteenth-century debates about slavery.⁴ For example, the White proslavery author Bernard Romans writes in 1776 that Black people are naturally inferior to White people (1776: 105) and that they are therefore a “naturally subjected species of mankind” (1776: 107).

Many antislavery authors, in turn, attack the argument that transatlantic slavery is justified because Black people are natural slaves. The effects-of-slavery strategy was among the most popular ways to refute this argument. To understand how it works, it helps to reconstruct the proslavery argument that alleges that Black people are natural slaves. One version of this argument runs as follows:

1. It is morally permissible to enslave any human being who naturally lacks characteristic X.⁵
2. Black people naturally lack characteristic X.
3. Therefore, it is morally permissible to enslave Black people.

Let us call this type of argument the ‘racial natural slavery argument.’ The first premise is the doctrine of natural slavery, and it is a normative claim. There are

3. Some helpful literature on this topic includes McCoskey 2012 and Isaac 2004.

4. I explore this role in Jorati 2024a.

5. As we will see, some authors invoke the possession of a specific negatively connoted characteristic, or a set of such characteristics, rather than the lack of a positively connoted characteristic. Yet this difference is at bottom insignificant since we can always describe the possession of a specific flaw or vice—such as laziness and stupidity, two traits that were commonly ascribed to enslaved Black people—as the lack of a corresponding excellence or virtue, such as industriousness and intelligence.

different accounts of what exactly 'X' is, though many early modern authors stick quite closely to Aristotle's characterization of natural slaves. The second premise, in contrast, is a descriptive claim about the natural characteristics of Black people. By 'natural,' proponents of this argument typically mean that this lack is innate, rather than acquired during the individual's lifetime.

The effects-of-slavery strategy attacks the racial natural slavery argument by rejecting its second premise while granting the first premise, at least for the sake of argument.⁶ More specifically, it attacks a small but crucial component of the second premise: the contention that the alleged deficiency is natural. Proponents of this strategy typically grant that Black people are deficient in the relevant characteristics. They merely insist that this deficiency is acquired as a result of enslavement and hence not natural in the pertinent sense. This suffices to undermine the racial natural slavery argument. Sometimes, proponents of the strategy additionally point out that a trait (or deficiency) that is acquired as a result of one's enslavement cannot possibly be the justification for one's original enslavement. In other words, they sometimes argue that racial natural slavery gets things backwards.⁷

There is also a version of the racial natural slavery argument that invokes a natural suitability or destination for slavery instead of the lack of a specific characteristic. We can understand this version as follows:

1. It is morally permissible to enslave any human being who is naturally destined for slavery.
2. Black people are naturally destined for slavery.
3. Therefore, it is morally permissible to enslave Black people.

In this version, the second premise is a teleological claim; it contends that Black people are intended by nature to be enslaved. While that may seem completely different from the corresponding premise in the first version, eighteenth-century authors typically view these claims as closely related. After all, they usually hold that being naturally destined for enslavement is grounded in one's natural characteristics. Conversely, they typically think that the reason why the lack of specific characteristics makes enslavement permissible is that this lack makes one naturally suited or destined for slavery. The effects-of-slavery strategy can be used to attack the second premise of this teleological version of the argument, as we will see in the next section.

6. Some proponents of this strategy provide separate reasons to reject the first premise, but those reasons are not strictly speaking part of the effects-of-slavery strategy and hence not relevant for present purposes.

7. We will see an explicit example of this argument later (Rousseau, *Social Contract* 1.2.8 [1762], 2019b: 45).

3. Examples of the effects-of-slavery strategy

3.1 *Effects on moral and intellectual traits*

Let us now examine some eighteenth-century instances of the effects-of-slavery strategy. The earliest example I will discuss is by John Woolman, a White New Jersey tailor and an influential Quaker antislavery activist. His most relevant work is *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes*, which was published in two parts. The first part, on which I will focus here, was composed in 1746 and published in 1754. Woolman invokes the effects-of-slavery strategy in a passage in which he counters the error that Black people are “worse by nature” than White people:

To prevent such error let us calmly consider their circumstance, and, the better to do it, make their case ours. Suppose, then, that our [i.e., White people’s] ancestors and we had been exposed to constant servitude, . . . that we had been destitute of the help of reading and good company; . . . [that we] had generally been treated as a contemptible, ignorant part of mankind. Should we, in that case, be less abject than they now are? (1971: 202)

In this passage, Woolman seems to grant that Black people are “abject,” but insists that this is merely an effect of slavery. In particular, it is an effect of the contempt and racism experienced by enslaved Black people and of their limited access to education. Their inferiority is not innate, essential, or natural; it is merely an effect of their circumstances. Every human being in these circumstances would exhibit the same characteristics. Hence these are not racial traits, even if they occur predominantly or exclusively among Black people.

We find a slightly different version of this strategy in Anthony Benezet who, like Woolman, was a White Quaker. He was one of the most influential and prolific North American antislavery writers in this period. What is relevant for our purposes is that, unlike Woolman, Benezet focuses specifically on an alleged inferiority in moral character. In his 1762 work *A Short Account of that Part of Africa, Inhabited by the Negroes*, Benezet uses the effects-of-slavery strategy in the following way:

Though the natural capacity of many [enslaved Black people] be ever so good, yet they have no inducement or opportunity of exerting it to any advantage, which naturally tends to depress their minds and sink their spirits into habits of idleness and sloth, which they would in all likelihood have been free from had they stood upon an equal footing with the white people. (2013: 67–8)

He focuses on “idleness and sloth,” which are character traits—and more specifically, character vices. Incidentally, these particular vices are frequently discussed in this context: the idea that Black people are lazy or slothful was a widespread stereotype.⁸

Another noteworthy aspect of Benezet’s discussion is his explanation of why enslavement has these negative effects: enslaved people lack the “inducement or opportunity” to develop what Benezet considers a virtuous attitude toward work. Woolman makes a similar point in his posthumously published *Journal*, namely, that slavery removes all incentives for being industrious. He explains that “free men, whose minds were properly on their business, [find] a satisfaction in improving, cultivating, and providing for their families” (ch. 4, 1971: 61). In contrast, these inducements are absent in enslaved people, who are “labouring to support others who claim them as their property, and expecting nothing but slavery during life” (1971: 61). In short, enslaved people have no incentive to work hard because they work not for themselves and their loved ones but for a master, and no matter how hard they work, they have no prospect of gaining freedom or improving their situation. The idea is presumably that these incentives are necessary for developing virtuous habits or acquiring a good character.⁹

An anonymous English author, in a 1760 work titled *Two Dialogues on the Man-Trade*, discusses the causes of the alleged moral shortcomings of enslaved Black people in a notably different way. After describing them as “perverse, sullen, and mischievous,” the author argues that these character flaws are simply results of being “unjustly deprived of their liberty, banished from their native country, from all their friends and relations, and made captives and slaves for life, . . . treated worse than dogs, and made to work harder than horses” (1760: 50). Anyone in such circumstances would develop the same character traits and would indeed be “apt to mutiny and rebel,” that is, try to regain their liberty (1760: 50). This anonymous author appears to describe the negative character traits of enslaved Black people as the results of the injustice, trauma, and violence inflicted on them by White enslavers.

While many authors focus on the ways in which enslavement corrupts the moral character of enslaved people, others focus on slavery’s adverse effects on intellectual characteristics. One such author is John Wesley, a White English

8. For an examination of this stereotype and its historical origins, see Rönnbäck 2014.

9. Mary Wollstonecraft, a White political philosopher from England, invokes a similar mechanism to counter the claim that some groups of people are “stupid by nature,” or naturally intellectually inferior. Authors who make this claim, she argues, fail to “consider that slaves, having no object to stimulate industry, have not their faculties sharpened by the only thing that can exercise them, self-interest” (*Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* [1796], letter 5, 1989: 266). It is unclear, however, whether Wollstonecraft is referring to transatlantic slavery or to political unfreedom in this passage; the context suggests the latter. Yet she explicitly argues for the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade elsewhere and criticizes racist depictions of the natural capacities of Africans. For an analysis of these claims, see Jorati 2024a: 192–201.

theologian. In his 1774 *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, he responds to the claim that Black people are a “miserably stupid . . . race of men” by arguing that enslavers are entirely to blame for this trait. Enslavers give enslaved people “no means, no opportunity of improving their understanding: And indeed leave them no motive, either from hope or fear, to attempt any such thing” (1774: 40, §4.8). As evidence for the claim that this intellectual disparity is simply a result of enslavement, Wesley points out that the Black inhabitants of Africa, who have the same motives and opportunities as Europeans, are not inferior to Europeans in any way. This shows that the “stupidity [of Black people] in our plantations is not natural; otherwise than it is the natural effect of their Condition” (1774: 40–1, §4.8). Hence, instead of merely engaging in a thought experiment, as Woolman did, Wesley invokes empirical evidence about the intellectual capacities of free Black people in order to support his claim that there is no natural deficiency.¹⁰

For an illustration of another way to use the effects-of-slavery strategy, let us turn to Olaudah Equiano, a prominent Afro-British abolitionist and formerly enslaved man who published his autobiographical antislavery work *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* in 1789. In the first chapter of this work, Equiano asks the following series of rhetorical questions:

Are there not causes enough to which the apparent inferiority of an African may be ascribed, without limiting the goodness of God, and supposing he forbore to stamp understanding on certainly his own image, because ‘carved in ebony’? Might it not naturally be ascribed to their situation? When they come among Europeans, they are ignorant of their language, religion, manners, and customs. Are any pains taken to teach them these? Are they treated as men? Does not slavery itself depress the mind, and extinguish all its fire, and every noble sentiment? (2003: 45)

This passage forcefully attacks the racist claim that Black people are naturally inferior to White people, and it seems to focus mainly on intellectual traits. Unlike others who attack this claim, however, Equiano uses an inference to the best explanation: the best explanation for the limited intellectual abilities of enslaved Black people in European colonies is not a natural or racial inferiority but rather the adverse conditions in which they are forced to live. Equiano’s rhetorical questions are supposed to help his readers see that the latter is obvi-

10. It is worth noting that other authors invoke a different type of empirical evidence, namely, evidence that White people who are enslaved—for instance in Eastern Europe—develop the same characteristics as enslaved Black people (e.g. Webster 1793: 6–7). Yet another type of empirical evidence is found in Benezet: in his 1783 *Short Observations on Slavery*, he draws on his own experience as a teacher of Black children and adults in Philadelphia, reporting that he has found among his Black students “as great variety of talents, equally capable of improvement as among a like number of whites” (2013: 233).

ously the correct explanation. Anyone who thinks about it can understand easily what effects enslavement, dehumanization, and the lack of education has on the human mind. No other explanation is needed for the characteristics that enslaved Black people exhibit. In this passage, Equiano also mentions a theological reason to reject the racist explanation: God created human beings in his image, and the image of God includes the capacity to reason or understand. The racist position is heretical, Equiano suggests here, because it portrays God as withholding a valuable capacity from some human beings simply because they are Black. That, he states, is clearly incompatible with divine goodness.

Equiano also discusses the negative effects of enslavement on the moral characters of enslaved people in a later chapter of the same work. There too, his explanation differs from the ones we have seen so far. Addressing members of slave-owning societies, he says, “When you make men slaves, you deprive them of half their virtue,¹¹ you set them in your own conduct, an example of fraud, rapine, and cruelty, and compel them to live with you in a state of war; and yet you complain that they are not honest or faithful!” (ch. 5, 2003: 111). Here Equiano concedes that enslaved people are less virtuous than free people but insists that this too is simply a consequence of their enslavement. Unlike the authors we examined earlier, he mentions the immoral behavior of enslavers as one of the main causes for the immorality of enslaved people. Enslavers behave extremely viciously toward enslaved people, which makes it hypocritical for the former to complain about the viciousness of the latter. It is no wonder, Equiano appears to be saying, if enslaved people follow the horrendously bad example set by their enslavers. He mentions as another factor that enslavers force enslaved people to live in a state of war with them, that is, a condition without mutually agreed-upon rules of conduct and without a legitimate ruler, in which individuals must resort to violence to defend themselves and acquire resources.¹² The idea here is that if you force someone to live in a state of war with you—instead of entering into a voluntary agreement with them—it is unreasonable to expect this person to behave virtuously toward you.

Yet another version of the effects-of-slavery strategy is found in a text by Benjamin Rush. He was a White professor of chemistry and medicine in Pennsylvania and a signatory of the Declaration of Independence. In his influential 1773 tract *An Address to the Inhabitants of the British Settlements*, Rush argues as follows:

Slavery is so foreign to the human mind, that the moral faculties, as well as those of the understanding are debased, and rendered torpid by it. All the vices which are charged upon the Negroes in the southern colonies

11. This appears to be a reference to a passage from Homer’s *Odyssey*, which claims that Zeus “takes away half the worth of a man when the day of slavery takes him” (book 17, lines 294–95, 2015: 322).

12. It was quite common for early modern philosophers to view the relation between enslaver and enslaved as a state of war; see for instance Locke, *Two Treatises* 2.24 (1988: 284).

and the West-Indies, such as Idleness, Treachery, Theft, and the like, are the genuine offspring of slavery, and serve as an argument to prove that they were not intended for it. (1773: 2)

The first sentence is similar to what we have already seen: Rush claims that slavery corrupts both the intellects and the moral faculties of enslaved people. He then mentions some examples of the character vices that he thinks enslavement causes in enslaved people, namely, laziness, deceitfulness, and a propensity to steal. What is most important for present purposes is how this passage ends: Rush says that these effects of slavery are proof that Black people were not intended for slavery. The basic idea seems to be that if someone were truly intended for slavery, then slavery would not have such horrific effects on their moral and intellectual faculties. In other words, his argument seems to be something like this:

- 1) The state of slavery corrupts the moral and intellectual faculties of Black people.
- 2) No state that corrupts a person's moral and intellectual faculties is the intended state for that person.
- 3) Therefore, the state of slavery is not the intended state for Black people.

This argument targets the teleological version of the racial natural slavery argument that I presented earlier. More specifically, it attacks the claim that Black people are naturally intended or destined for slavery.

The second premise of Rush's argument should appeal to many in the eighteenth century. It is part of a widely accepted teleological worldview in which what is natural for a person, or the way in which a person is meant to live, has to do with the conditions under which this person can thrive intellectually and morally. This worldview can either take the form of the theological doctrine that God wants humans to become morally virtuous and attain specific kinds of knowledge, or it can take the form of a non-theistic eudaimonist theory of well-being, such as Aristotle's. Because this teleological worldview was so popular in this period, proponents of racial natural slavery are most likely to reject the first premise. This makes it important for antislavery writers to support the first premise with empirical evidence, like Wesley, or with philosophical theories about the ways in which enslavement affects the human mind, like some of the other authors we have encountered.

3.2 The rejection of moral differences

The texts we have examined so far appear to argue that enslavement damages the moral characters or intellectual abilities of enslaved people. A different and

quite radical explanation of the allegedly immoral behavior of enslaved people comes from a surprising source: Thomas Jefferson, the White politician and slaveowner from Virginia who was the primary author of the Declaration of Independence and later became the third president of the United States. He cannot be categorized as an opponent of slavery, or at least not straightforwardly. While he sometimes claimed to hope that slavery will eventually be abolished, he did not emancipate the enslaved people on his plantation during his lifetime, and he did not use his considerable political power to advocate for abolition.¹³ Moreover, he provides a deeply racist assessment of the intellectual capacities of Black people in his 1785 *Notes on the State of Virginia*, arguing or at least hypothesizing that Black people are intellectually inferior to White people by nature (Query 14, 1787: 235–39/1984: 267–70). Nevertheless, he argues in the same work that there are no natural differences in moral character. This is the context in which Jefferson makes an astonishing point about the ways in which enslavement affects enslaved people:

That disposition to theft with which [Blacks] have been branded, must be ascribed to their situation, and not to any depravity of the moral sense. The man, in whose favor no laws of property exist, probably feels himself less bound to respect those made in favor of others. When arguing for ourselves, we lay it down as fundamental, that laws, to be just, must give a reciprocation of right: that, without this, they are mere arbitrary rules of conduct, founded in force, and not in conscience. (Query 14, 1787: 237–38/1984: 269)

Here, Jefferson concedes that enslaved people have less respect for laws of property than free people but argues that this is simply because these laws are made exclusively in favor of the latter. The root of the problem is that American property laws are unjust and arbitrary, “founded in force, and not in conscience,” because they are not reciprocal. Jefferson even goes on to ask rhetorically whether an enslaved person may not “as justifiably take a little from [someone], who has taken all from him, as he may slay [someone] who would slay him” (1787: 238/1984: 269). In other words, he is claiming that stealing from one’s enslaver is as justifiable as self-defense. He adds that aside from the lack of respect for property laws, there are no moral differences between Black and White people; there is no difference with respect to character virtues like “rigid integrity, . . . benevolence, gratitude, and unshaken fidelity” (1787: 238/1984: 269).

Jefferson is arguing quite differently from the other authors encountered so far: he ascribes enslaved Black people’s alleged propensity to steal not to a moral

13. For more on this, see Jorati 2024a: 32–5 and 76–8.

vice or character flaw, but rather to the injustice of the property laws in the United States during the late eighteenth century.¹⁴ These laws were made solely in favor of free people, since enslaved people were not allowed to have property of their own. Quite to the contrary, these laws treated enslaved people as property. As a result, Jefferson claims, it is not just understandable but morally justifiable for enslaved Black people to disobey these laws. A propensity to break unjust or illegitimate laws is not a vice.¹⁵ Hence, while other authors concede that enslaved Black people possess moral vices and focus on arguing that these vices result from enslavement, Jefferson refuses to make this concession and argues that it is morally permissible to resist a systemic injustice or disobey an unjust law.

3.3 *The intentional deterioration of enslaved people's minds*

A completely different application of the effects-of-slavery strategy is found in a fascinating text composed by Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, two Black American clergymen and leaders of the free Black community in Philadelphia. Both grew up enslaved but gained freedom during the American Revolution. They co-wrote a pamphlet titled *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People* in 1794 in which they give advice to enslaved and free Black people as well as to White proponents of slavery. In the section that targets proponents of slavery, Jones and Allen explicitly argue against the claim that “our . . . baseness is incurable, and [that we] may therefore be held in a state of servitude” (1794: 23) and against opponents who “plead our incapacity for freedom . . . as a sufficient cause for keeping us under the grievous yoke” (1794: 25). In other words, they argue against racial natural slavery. The allegedly inferior traits they mention here are worth noting: a “baseness,” that is, an immoral character, as well as an “incapacity for freedom,” which might be a reference to an inability to make good decisions for oneself.

When they rebut racial natural slavery in the section that addresses proponents of slavery, Jones and Allen do two things that set them apart from the authors we

14. As we will see later, Diderot and Pechméja make a similar claim about the alleged deceitfulness of enslaved Black people: “They are deceitful because one does not owe the truth to one’s tyrants” (in Raynal, *History* bk 11, ch 24, §30, 1780: 197/2020: 176).

15. Other authors make related points, but without stating that these effects of enslavement do not count as moral vices. Noah Webster, whom we will encounter later, is one example. In his 1793 work *Effects of Slavery, on Morals and Industry*, he asks rhetorically, “Is it expectable that men, who are precluded by violence from enjoying the benefits of society, should cultivate the virtues from which its blessings flow? Is it not more natural that the subjects of oppression, sensible they are robbed of their rights and resenting the injury, should perpetually struggle to indemnify themselves for the loss, and when it would be fruitless to use open force, that they should have recourse to the arts of treachery and fraud? The principles of human nature warrant this conclusion, and account for the detestable character of slaves in all ages and all countries” (1793: 8).

have encountered so far. First, they propose an experiment: their White readers should cultivate the minds of some Black children “with the same care, and let them have the same prospect in view, as to living in the world, as [White readers] would wish for [their] own children” (1794: 24). This experiment would clearly show, Jones and Allen contend, that Black and White people have exactly the same natural capacities and that any differences in character or intellect that are observable in America are the results of disparate circumstances.¹⁶ One particularly intriguing aspect of this passage is its reference to the importance of one’s “prospect . . . as to living in the world.” The idea appears to be that slavery as practiced in the United States has such horrendous effects on enslaved people in part because it deprives them of all hope or prospects for a good life. In the section of this text that addresses Black readers, Jones and Allen describe the hopelessness that they experienced when they were enslaved: “the bands of bondage were so strong, that no way appeared for our release,” and even though their religious faith sometimes gave them hope, at other times “the prospect of liberty almost vanished away, and we were in darkness and perplexity” (1794: 26). Thus, their version of the effects-of-slavery strategy is based on their own experience; they know through direct experience that the hopelessness of slavery is one of the features that explain the disparity between Black and White Americans.¹⁷

The experiment that Jones and Allen propose also reveals that according to them, the effects of slavery cannot easily be undone in people who grew up enslaved. They say so explicitly: “we freely confess the vile habits often acquired in a state of servitude, are not easily thrown off. . . . It is in our posterity enjoying the same privileges with your own, that you ought to look for better things” (1794: 24). This is important in part because it means that the behavior of formerly enslaved people cannot be used as evidence for the natural inferiority of Black people.¹⁸ Differences in their behavior are likely to be due to the lasting effects of their former enslavement.

Jones and Allen make a second remarkable claim: addressing proponents of slavery, they note that “[t]he judicious part of mankind will think it unreasonable, that a superior good conduct is looked for, from our race, . . . [when] you try

16. Some early modern proponents of women’s equality propose an analogous experiment to refute the claim that women are naturally inferior to men. One example is Émilie Du Châtelet (preface to *Fable of the Bees* [1735], 2009: 48–9).

17. I thank Julie Walsh for encouraging me to think more carefully about the ways in which the personal experience of enslaved and formerly enslaved writers might influence their argumentation. I will discuss several other instances below.

18. The anonymous text “Letters of a Negro,” which I will examine in more detail below, makes a similar point about the unfairness of judging the nature of Black people based on the characteristics they exhibit in slavery: “we should have been considered as we are found in our native woods, and not as we are altered and perverted by an inhuman political institution” (Anonymous 1788: 59).

what you can to prevent our rising from the state of barbarism, you represent us to be in" (1794: 23). Here, they appear to be claiming that White enslavers intentionally prevent Black people from improving in order to be able to continue enslaving them. In other words, the horrendous effects of slavery on the characters of enslaved people are not unintended side-effects; they are fully intentional. This claim, too, might be based on their own experience of enslavement.

Only a few other texts from this period accuse White people of purposely making Black people inferior. One such text is Olaudah Equiano's *Narrative*, which we already encountered earlier. In chapter 5, he accuses White slaveholders of thinking that it is "necessary to keep [enslaved people] in a state of ignorance" (2003: 111).¹⁹ In other words, Equiano accuses enslavers of purposely making enslaved people intellectually inferior. Like Jones and Allen, Equiano might know this from his own experience of enslavement.

Another text that makes this accusation is the 1792 prose drama *Black Slavery, or the Happy Shipwreck*, composed by the White French philosopher Olympe de Gouges. In the play's first scene, Zamor—a fictional Black man who is enslaved in the West Indies and who is one of the protagonists of the play—states that White planters "take care not to instruct us. If by chance our eyes were to open, we would be horrified by the state to which they have reduced us, and we would shake off a yoke as cruel as it is shameful" (Gouges 1994: 92/237).²⁰ This passage not only accuses slaveholders of keeping enslaved people ignorant on purpose, but also explains why they do so: to prevent enslaved people from becoming fully aware of the injustice of their situation and hence to prevent revolts.

A much more detailed version of this accusation occurs in a fascinating anonymous two-part essay titled "Letters of a Negro," which was published in a British newspaper in 1788. The author describes himself as a formerly enslaved Black man whose master granted him freedom and gave him access to education from a young age; he seems to have moved to England after gaining freedom. His main objective in the first letter is to argue against racial natural slavery, or as he puts it, against the contention that "we are . . . addicted to more and worse vices than those of any other complexion, and such is the innate perverseness of our minds, that nature seems to have marked us out for slavery" (1788: 58).²¹

19. Another example is Ottobah Cugoano, who writes in his 1787 *Thoughts and Sentiments* that White enslavers "have in general endeavoured to keep the Black People in total ignorance as much as they can" (1999: 108).

20. The edition I cite (Gouges 1994) contains the French original and an English translation of the 1792 version of Gouges's play. The passage I quote is also contained verbatim in the 1788 version of this play (1788: 6), which generally differs in significant ways from the 1792 version. For an analysis of Gouges's play and her views on slavery and race, see Jorati 2024a: 254–64.

21. The second letter, which was published in the next issue of the same newspaper (*The Repository* no. 3, February 1, 1788), refutes other common defenses of transatlantic slavery, such as the contention that transatlantic slaves are typically penal slaves or war slaves, or that they are

When arguing against this contention, he explicitly accuses White people of producing these character vices on purpose: “It is the character I grant which our inhuman masters have agreed to give us, and which they have too industriously and too successfully propagated, in order to palliate their own guilt by blackening the helpless victims of it, and to disguise their own cruelty under the semblance of justice” (1788: 58). What is particularly noteworthy about this passage is that the anonymous author, like Gouges, describes the relevant traits not just as purposely caused but also as serving to perpetuate the institution of slavery. According to this text, causing these traits makes it easier for White enslavers to justify their power over enslaved Black people. It is one of the mechanisms that keeps oppressive power structures in place.

Later in the same text, the anonymous author elaborates on his accusation: “Cruel that you are! you make us slaves; you implant in our minds all the vices which are in some degree inseparable from that condition, and you then impiously impute to nature and to God the origin of those vices, to which you alone have given birth, and punish in us the crimes of which you are yourselves the authors” (1788: 59). This is noteworthy because it portrays the racial natural slavery argument as disingenuous, or at least an instance of hypocrisy. The author then goes on to analyze the ways in which enslavement prevents enslaved people from achieving moral excellence, theorizing that becoming virtuous requires social relations, including family relations, which enslaved people are prevented from having.²²

3.4 *Internalized racism as an effect of slavery*

The author of “Letters of a Negro” makes another point that we have not seen before: he describes internalized oppression or internalized racism, that is, the adverse effects of enslavement on the self-conception of enslaved people: “Would it be surprising if a slave, labouring under all these disadvantages, oppressed, insulted, scorned and trampled on, should come at last to despise himself, to believe the calumnies of his oppressors, and to persuade himself that it would be against his nature to cherish any honourable sentiment, or to attempt any virtuous action?” (1788: 60). This is an explicit description of the effects of slavery on enslaved people’s self-worth. It is similar to what W.E.B. Du Bois describes as double-consciousness more than a hundred years later: oppressed people start viewing themselves partially through the eyes of their oppressors and internalize what their oppressors believe about them. Note that the

better off in European plantations than they would be in Africa. The first letter was reprinted in at least two American newspapers soon after its original publication.

22. This fits well with Orlando Patterson’s analysis of slavery as social death and natal alienation (2018).

anonymous letter is making a very strong claim about internalized oppression: it claims that enslaved people are likely not only to start believing in their own inferiority but even to believe that they are so completely incapable of virtue that it does not make sense for them to attempt to act virtuously. Thus, the beliefs that they internalize affect their moral faculties.

I am familiar with only two earlier texts that invoke internalized racism. One is by the White Scottish philosopher James Dunbar. He argues in a 1780 work titled *Essays on the History of Mankind* that as a result of enslavement, the “Self-reverence [of enslaved people] is gone; and emancipation itself cannot restore them to the honours of human nature. In time, they view themselves almost in the light in which they are viewed by their rulers” (1780: 389). Like the passage from the anonymous letter that I quoted earlier, this is clearly a description of internalized racism. The passage is noteworthy for another reason: like Jones and Allen, Dunbar seems to hold that the effects of slavery cannot be undone simply by freeing enslaved people. He also discusses a few traits that he views as naturally resulting from enslavement which we have not encountered so far: according to him, slavery naturally causes feelings of “Hatred, envy, and revenge” in enslaved people and eventually erodes their natural appreciation for liberty (1780: 389).

Another text that invokes internalized racism is the 1780 edition of Guillaume-Thomas Raynal’s *History of the Two Indies*. In a portion of this work that was composed by the two White French philosophers Denis Diderot and Jean-Joseph de Pechméja,²³ the authors accuse enslavers of brainwashing enslaved people into believing in their own inferiority, and indeed, into accepting the racial natural slavery argument. Because this is a different way of using the effects-of-slavery strategy, the relevant passage is worth quoting in full. In response to the proslavery argument that transatlantic slavery is justified through the alleged intellectual limitations and moral depravity of Black people, Diderot and Pechméja write,

Negroes’ intellects are limited because slavery breaks all the springs of the soul. They are mean, though not mean enough to you. They are deceitful because one does not owe the truth to one’s tyrants. They recognize the superiority of our minds because we have perpetuated their ignorance; they acknowledge the justice of our rule because we have taken advantage of their weakness. Unable to maintain our superiority by force, a criminal politics has resorted to trickery. You have almost succeeded in persuading them that they are a singular species born for

23. Diderot revised passages from the previous two editions—from 1770 and 1774—that were composed by Pechméja. Portions of the passage in question is already contained in the previous editions (1770: 170–71 and 1774: 221), but one of the crucial claims about racial natural slavery is only present in the 1780 edition (1780: 197), and hence presumably Diderot’s addition. For more information about the authorship and publication history of the *History of the Two Indies*, see Thomson 2017.

abjectness and dependence, for work and punishment. You have done everything to degrade these unfortunate people, and you then reproach them for being vile. (Raynal, *History* bk 11, ch 24, §30, 1780: 197/2020: 176)

This passage makes some claims that we have already encountered elsewhere, for instance, that enslaved people are kept ignorant on purpose and that some of the alleged vices of enslaved Black people are not vices at all, but morally permissible responses to oppression. Being deceitful and mean to one's enslavers is not a moral vice. What is most notable is the claim that enslavers purposely change the self-conception of enslaved Black people, convincing them that they are inferior to White people and naturally destined for slavery. The authors portray this as a ruse or as trickery, employed by enslavers to maintain their own power. This is a different type of internalized racism than the one described by Dunbar and the anonymous author of "Letters of a Negro." Diderot and Pechméja claim that White enslavers purposely cultivate this negative self-conception in enslaved Black people; it is not merely a side-effect of oppression.

3.5 Mechanisms by which slavery deteriorates the mind

Some authors describe the mechanisms by which slavery affects the moral and intellectual faculties of enslaved people in particularly detailed ways. One of these authors is Benjamin Franklin, the White writer, scientist, and politician from Philadelphia who served on the committee to draft the Declaration of Independence and was a delegate to the constitutional convention. He describes these mechanisms in a speech that he delivered when he was president of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society in 1789. The speech is not strictly speaking an instance of the effects-of-slavery strategy because Franklin does not invoke the effects of slavery to argue that slavery is wrong. Rather, he invokes them as evidence that "freedom may often prove a misfortune to [a formerly enslaved person], and prejudicial to society" (2005: 431). Nevertheless, his description of the mechanisms by which enslavement affects the human mind is worth examining:

The unhappy man, who has long been treated as a brute animal, too frequently sinks beneath the common standard of the human species. The galling chains, that bind his body, do also fetter his intellectual faculties, and impair the social affections of his heart. Accustomed to move like a mere machine, by the will of a master, reflection is suspended; he has not the power of choice; and reason and conscience have but little influence over his conduct, because he is chiefly governed by the passion of fear. (2005: 430–31)

Franklin here explains how, exactly, enslavement can damage the intellects and wills of enslaved people. They are accustomed to obeying their enslavers without thinking for themselves and, as a result, lose the habit or ability to reflect on their own actions, make their own choices, or direct their behavior through reason.²⁴ They act mainly based on fear—presumably fear of being punished if they disobey.

Noah Webster, the prominent White lexicographer and author from Connecticut, provides a somewhat similar explanation in his 1793 work *Effects of Slavery, on Morals and Industry*—a work that is entirely devoted to exploring the various effects of slavery. He writes,

It is evidently the will of heaven that men should be prompted to action by a regard to their own benefit and happiness. Whenever by the positive institutions of society, or by external force, men are stripped of the power of exerting themselves for their own benefit, the mind, having lost its spring or stimulus, either ceases to act, and men become mere machines, moving only when impelled by some extraneous power; or if the mind acts at all, it is at the impulse of violent passions, struggling to throw off an unnatural restraint, and to revenge the injury. Hence it is, that slaves, with few exceptions, may be divided into two classes, the indolent and the villanous. (1793: 6)

This passage combines and repackages some of the ideas we have already seen elsewhere: that enslaved people are deprived of the incentives that prompt free people to pursue an honest or industrious life, that this eventually renders them unable to act based on their own reasoning, and that they are consequently prone to either laziness or crime. Like Franklin's speech, this text points to specific psychological mechanisms that cause these negative effects.

3.6 *Reversing the effects of slavery*

Proponents of the effects-of-slavery strategy disagree about whether the effects of slavery can be undone, and if so, how. As noted earlier, Jones and Allen claim that only later generations of Black Americans, who grow up without slavery and with the same privileges as White people, will be completely free of the effects of slavery (1794: 24); Dunbar seems to agree. Those who grew up in slavery

24. A similar idea is expressed in the anonymous American pamphlet *Tyrannical Libertymen* in 1795: enslaved Black people "have been habituated, not to reason, but obey; their wills have been crushed; they are scarce conscious of the power of willing; and, what is worse, they are not taught the duties that arise from social relations, nor disciplined in good morals" (Anonymous 1795: 8).

will not be able to overcome its adverse effects completely. Other authors are more optimistic and argue that the effects of slavery can be undone by educating and supporting recently emancipated people. Take for instance the anonymous author of the 1795 American tract *Tyrannical Libertymen*:

If [enslaved Black people] are not fit for freedom, they must be fitted. . . . They must . . . be taken away from their masters, and, by direction of the magistrate, put under temporary guardians, governours, and instructors, to be educated, to be made acquainted with their rights and duties, and some honest method of acquiring a livelihood; to be prepared for citizenship. (1795: 9)

A few authors are even more optimistic and argue that many negative effects of slavery will disappear automatically at the time of emancipation. One example is Levi Hart, a White Calvinist pastor from Connecticut: in a text from 1774, he argues that emancipated people will behave far more virtuously than enslaved people because “they will be members of the community, & have a common interest with others in the support of good order & preservation [of] private property” — neither of which is the case for someone living in slavery (*Some Thoughts on the Subject of Freeing the Negroes*, 2002: 120). This fits well with Woolman’s and Benezet’s claims that one reason for slavery’s adverse effects is that it removes the incentives that motivate free people to develop virtuous habits.

3.7 Key features of eighteenth-century analyses of the effects of slavery

Let us take stock. According to the texts we have examined, the effects of slavery on enslaved people include the following: character vices, impaired social affections, the loss of their desire for freedom, a weak or underdeveloped intellect and will, a negative self-conception, and an unfitness for liberty. Some of these effects are clear examples of what we today call “moral damage,” that is, damage to one’s moral character that results from one’s circumstances, such as from living under oppression.²⁵ Other effects constitute damage to non-moral aspects of one’s mind, such as one’s intellectual abilities. We have also seen that

25. Authors who claim that oppressed people sustain moral damage often point out that oppression can also cause moral damage in oppressors. In the eighteenth century, examples include John Woolman (*Some Considerations Part 1* [1754], 1971: 205–06), Benjamin Franklin (*Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind* [1751], 2005: 326), and Olaudah Equiano (*Interesting Narrative* [1789], ch. 5, 2003: 111). For a contemporary example, see Tessman 2005: 53–80.

eighteenth-century authors ascribe these effects to a few different aspects of enslavement: the experience of racism and dehumanization, the lack of access to education, the deprivation of a full social life and of property rights, the lack of incentives to be industrious or law-abiding, the lack of prospects, constant fear, the habit of obeying one's enslaver without thinking for oneself, the bad example set by enslavers, and the intentional production of these effects by enslavers.

4. Potential benefits of the effects-of-slavery strategy

The effects-of-slavery strategy was enormously popular in the eighteenth century, and it is easy to see why. First, it allows antislavery writers to refute the racial natural slavery argument without having to contest the first premise, namely, the normative claim that it is permissible to enslave people who are naturally inferior or destined for slavery. Even though many antislavery authors contest this normative claim as well,²⁶ it may be strategically advantageous to provide an additional refutation that focuses exclusively on the second premise. Indeed, proponents of the effects-of-slavery strategy can even grant that Black people possess inferior characteristics.²⁷ Granting as much as possible to one's opponents can be a good strategy, as long as one can provide persuasive reasons to reject one crucial element of the opponents' argument. The effects-of-slavery strategy does this by rejecting the claim that the alleged inferiority is natural while granting everything else.

A related benefit of this strategy might be that it suggests an error theory for certain racist beliefs. Specifically, it allows opponents of slavery to explain why racist doctrines like racial natural slavery are so widely accepted in slaveholding societies. After all, if enslavement typically causes intellectual and moral traits that are viewed as inferior, a large proportion of Black people will exhibit these inferior traits in societies in which nearly all Black people are enslaved. This correlation in turn can lead White people to think that these traits are racial traits rather than effects of enslavement, and that these traits can serve as a justification for racial slavery. In other words, people might infer the wrong causal explanation for this correlation.²⁸ Even though we have already seen reasons to doubt that this was generally an innocent mistake,²⁹ it may be strategically useful

26. I discuss eighteenth-century arguments against natural slavery in Jorati 2024a. Very few antislavery writers in this period explicitly endorse natural slavery and many argue against it.

27. As we will see later, this is also one reason to find this strategy problematic.

28. In the next section, we will see that Rousseau ascribes this mistake to Aristotle, accusing him of mistaking the effects of slavery for its cause (*Social Contract* 1.2.8 [1762], 2019b: 45).

29. Diderot and Pechméja appear to make this point, as seen earlier, and so does the anonymous author of "Letters of a Negro." More explicit versions of this point are found as early as 1680, in Morgan Godwyn's work *The Negro's and Indians Advocate*. Godwyn argues that racist doctrines about the subhuman status of Black people were invented by European plantation owners out of

to provide this error theory and thereby encourage White people to become more cautious when confronted with what they may perceive as empirical evidence for their superiority. Or, to put this slightly differently, it may prompt White people to become more aware of systemic injustice and its effects.³⁰

Another potential benefit of this strategy might be that it identifies nonobvious ways in which enslavement prevents enslaved people from living good lives and hence additional reasons why slavery is wrong. While many antislavery arguments stress the physical and emotional toll of slavery on enslaved people, the effects-of-slavery strategy contends that there is another important way in which enslavement adversely affects enslaved people: it damages their moral and intellectual faculties and thereby prevents them from flourishing.³¹ This strategy can be particularly effective for those who understand human well-being in broadly Aristotelian ways—namely, as requiring intellectual and moral excellence—rather than in hedonistic ways, or as requiring the maximization of pleasure and minimization of pain.³² Because Christianized versions of Aristotelianism were widespread in the eighteenth century, and more generally because Christian theology does not typically present suffering as an obstacle to a good life, the focus on damage to one’s intellectual and moral character has clear advantages.

Something else that must have made this strategy popular is that it fits well with Enlightenment theories that present freedom as a necessary condition for human flourishing. Many philosophers in this period connect freedom to flourishing, albeit in different ways. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for instance, claims that freedom is necessary for moral virtue and that unfreedom corrupts human nature (*Social Contract* 1.2.8, 2019b: 45; *Second Discourse* 2.39, 2019a: 181). Likewise, Mary Wollstonecraft contends that freedom is necessary for developing our rational capacities: liberty is a necessary condition for becoming “either a reasonable or dignified being” (*French Revolution* 2.4, 1989: 115), which explains the “lowest state of beastly degradation” of French people before the Revolution (2.1, 1989: 52).³³ And, to name one last example, Immanuel Kant argues that when someone

self-interest, as an excuse for their inhumane treatment of Black people (1680: 3; 1680: 12–3; 1680: 41). Thus, Godwyn insists that these racist doctrines originated not as an innocent mistake but as a calculated, selfish strategy for justifying slavery. For more on Godwyn, see Jorati 2024b: 283–9.

30. I thank Iziah Topete for prompting me to think about this potential benefit.

31. There were many other strategies as well; I do not mean to suggest that these are the only two options. One other common strategy was to focus on the violation of the moral and legal rights of enslaved people, such as the right to liberty.

32. This is somewhat ironic since, as mentioned earlier, Aristotle is a proponent of natural slavery. As Lisa Tessman points out, Aristotelianism is useful for analyses of oppression for another reason: Aristotle stressed the importance of social and political factors for human flourishing (Tessman 2005: 49)—unlike other eudaimonists who argue that human beings can flourish regardless of their external circumstances.

33. Intriguingly, Wollstonecraft notes how ridiculous it would be for someone who observes this degradation to conclude “that frenchmen are a distinct race, formed by nature, or by habit, to

is deprived of freedom for a long time, they become immature and unable to make good decisions.³⁴ In short, prominent Enlightenment theories can be used to support the claim that enslavement is incompatible with moral or intellectual excellence and with a good human life.

Another potential benefit of this strategy is that it might shed light on the mechanisms that maintain oppressive structures. As we saw in the previous section, claims about the inferior capacities of Black people were often used to justify the continuation of transatlantic slavery. Indeed, we saw that according to some eighteenth-century authors, enslavers purposely propagate these traits in enslaved people in order to justify and facilitate their continued enslavement. It is easy to see how some of the traits that were commonly ascribed to enslaved Black people might serve to maintain their subordination. It is presumably much more difficult to keep someone enslaved who is highly educated and has a strong sense of self-worth than someone who is uneducated, has diminished self-worth, is unable to reflect and plan for the future, or has resigned themselves to slavery. Hence, the intellectual and moral damage identified by the effects-of-slavery strategy is arguably among the mechanisms that perpetuate oppression. This may be crucial for abolitionists to know, especially if the damage does not disappear immediately after the abolition of slavery. After all, if emancipated people continue to exhibit some of these traits, abolitionists may need to address this damage in order to enable formerly enslaved people to live good lives and escape oppression.³⁵

5. Reasons to worry about the effects-of-slavery strategy

Despite the potential benefits of the effects-of-slavery strategy, there are several reasons to view it as problematic. One reason is that even though it is intended to counter racism—specifically, the racist doctrine of racial natural slavery and thereby the institution of racial slavery—it may inadvertently be racist itself. Ibram X. Kendi argues this explicitly. After mentioning Benjamin Rush’s version of this strategy, he claims that it is racist because,

Whether benevolent or not, any idea that suggests that Black people as a group are inferior, that something is wrong with Black people, is a racist idea. Slavery was killing, torturing, raping, and exploiting people,

be slaves; and incapable of ever attaining those noble sentiments, which characterize a free people” (2.1, 1989: 52).

34. Kant argues this with respect to children in lectures from 1775–76 (“Anthropology Friedländer,” Ak 25, 1997: 582/2012: 136) and applies it to enslaved people in lectures from 1784–85 (“Anthropology Mrongovius,” Ak 25, 1997: 1298–300/2012: 412). For a discussion of these passages and their relevance for Kant’s views on transatlantic slavery, see Jorati 2024a: 301–02.

35. Lisa Tessman makes this claim about oppression in general (2005: 47).

tearing apart families, snatching precious time, and locking captives in socioeconomic desolation. The confines of enslavement were producing Black people who were intellectually, psychologically, culturally, and behaviorally different, not inferior. (2016: 98)

In other words, Kendi claims that while it is legitimate to assert that enslavement causes intellectual, psychological, and behavioral differences, it is never legitimate to assert that it causes a mental or moral inferiority. After all, describing Black people as inferior is racist.

Kendi's definition of racism is broader than many others; it does not require that the alleged inferiority is viewed as natural or unchangeable. Yet, even if we set aside the question of how best to conceptualize racism, there are good reasons to worry about ascribing these types of inferiority to Black people, or enslaved Black people, as a group. First, it can reinforce racist stereotypes. As we have seen, most eighteenth-century authors who use the effects-of-slavery strategy seem happy to ascribe to enslaved Black people pretty much all the negative traits that proponents of racial natural slavery ascribe to them. They do not merely grant these traits for the sake of argument but affirm that enslaved Black people possess these traits. Indeed, they often seem too quick to simply grant these negative depictions, instead of investigating whether these stereotypes might lack a factual basis altogether or whether some of the behaviors that are allegedly evidence for character vices might be explained in other ways. Only a very small number of authors, as we have seen, argue that some of the relevant behaviors or habits of enslaved people are simply due to differences in incentives or reasons and are indeed perfectly rational and morally justified. Second, there is a danger of othering and demonizing enslaved people by describing them as morally and intellectually inferior to their oppressors. Whether this counts as racism or not, it is clearly problematic.

In addition, one may worry that this type of strategy is not an effective way to counter oppression or inequality. For instance, Daryl Michael Scott claims that in post-reconstruction American history, portraying Black Americans as morally damaged has proved an ineffective method for promoting equality. On this basis, he argues that it is a mistake to use damage imagery when trying to justify policy changes: "depicting black folk as pathological has not served the community's best interest. Again and again, contempt has proven to be the flip side of pity. And through it all, biological and cultural notions of black inferiority have lived on, worsening the plight of black people" (1997: xviii).³⁶ As Scott suggests here, one reason why such a strategy may be ineffective is

36. Scott does not advocate against investigating the ways in which oppression may negatively affect the minds or characters of oppressed people; he merely argues that this type of damage should never be invoked when arguing for policy changes.

that it may evoke contempt for Black people. This is plausible: it makes sense that describing a group as morally or intellectually degraded is an ineffective way to secure equal rights and respect for this group.

Moreover, the effects-of-slavery strategy may inadvertently blame, or at least seem to blame, oppressed people for their own oppression. By focusing on the psychological and moral damage of enslaved Black people and on the ways in which this damage perpetuates inequality, one may seem to portray Black people, rather than their White oppressors, as the problem. Lisa Tessman makes this point in the context of oppression in general: “highlighting what are actually wounds due to oppressive conditions can unintentionally lend credibility to a victim-blaming stance that attributes a group’s subordination to an inherent or self-perpetuating inferiority” (2005: 6). The danger of victim-blaming seems particularly acute when invoking moral damage, that is, when ascribing character vices or character flaws to oppressed people as a result of their oppression: “[I]f I am described as having *character* flaws, it seems that it is I who am morally responsible for my deficiency, not to mention for any reprehensible actions that proceed from my flawed character” (Tessman 2005: 37).³⁷

There are many historical illustrations of the problem of victim-blaming. For instance, Tommie Shelby notes that this happened in the twentieth century with the hypothesis that there is a “culture of poverty” in American ghettos that perpetuates the wealth gap between Black and White Americans. This hypothesis, Shelby explains, has been used to “blame the black urban poor for their circumstances or to absolve government of any responsibility for alleviating the plight of the black poor” (2016: 81). This shows that victim-blaming is problematic for two reasons: it unfairly blames the wrong party, and it may serve as an excuse to ignore systemic problems. If Black people’s culture or character traits, rather than persisting systemic racism, were to blame for the disparities between Black and White Americans, the solution would not require any systemic changes but merely changes in the attitudes and habits of Black Americans.³⁸

37. Tessman ultimately contends that one can avoid this problem by understanding the moral damage resulting from oppression as constitutive or systemic bad moral luck. This allows us to blame oppressive systems for the damage without depriving oppressed people of moral agency (2005: 38). Moreover, she holds that despite her worries about this strategy, it is important to recognize moral damage and other effects of oppression on the minds of the oppressed. She argues that ignoring moral damage “leads to a misrepresentation of how oppression is maintained, and relying on this misrepresentation can diminish the capacity of oppressed groups to pursue liberatory projects” (2001: 81). In other words, ignoring this type of damage can impede the fight against oppression because moral damage is among the mechanisms that perpetuate oppressive structures.

38. It is worth noting that Tessman argues for a way to invoke moral damage that allows us to acknowledge both the importance of addressing the structural problems that cause moral damage and the importance of addressing the moral damage that has already been inflicted (2005: 47). She insists that it is a mistake to ignore either the systemic or the individual side.

There are also eighteenth-century illustrations of the dangers of victim-blaming. Take, for instance, the White French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who uses the effects-of-slavery strategy and then immediately seems to blame enslaved people for their plight:

Aristotle was right [that some people are born for slavery], but he mistook the effect for the cause. Any man born in slavery is born for slavery, nothing is more certain. Slaves lose everything in their chains, even the desire to be rid of them; they love their servitude. . . . Hence, if there are slaves by nature, it is because there were slaves contrary to nature. Force made the first slaves, their cowardice perpetuated them. (*Social Contract* 1.2.8 [1762], 2019b: 45)

This passage ascribes the continuation of slavery to the “cowardice” of enslaved people, which on a straightforward interpretation amounts to victim-blaming. It is also possible, however, to interpret Rousseau as claiming merely that the cowardice that results from one’s enslavement is one of the mechanisms that maintains the oppressive power structure. If that is Rousseau’s point, it may not amount to victim-blaming and resembles claims made by some of the eighteenth-century authors we encountered in section 3. However, even if that is the correct way to read this passage, this illustrates how difficult it can be to make this point without seeming to engage in victim-blaming. The passage also illustrates another problem with at least some versions of the effects-of-slavery strategy: it suggests that because slavery has these effects on enslaved people, slavery is not ultimately all that bad for enslaved people because once they are used to it, they no longer desire liberty and indeed start to love their own enslavement.

A closely related problem with the effects-of-slavery strategy is that its main idea can be used as an excuse to delay abolition and to preserve oppressive institutions. Indeed, it was often used that way. Benjamin Franklin expresses this general idea, as we already saw earlier: he states that because of the negative effects of enslavement, “freedom may often prove a misfortune to [a formerly enslaved person], and prejudicial to society” (2005: 431). In other words, when enslaved people’s minds and moral characters have been so deeply corrupted by enslavement that they are no longer fit for liberty, it may be bad for them, and dangerous to society, to gain freedom.³⁹ To his credit, Franklin does not use this

39. This idea, in turn, might facilitate the rise of a different form of racism, namely one that ascribes to Black people an acquired or cultural inferiority rather than a natural or biological one. As mentioned in footnote 1, cultural racism and culture-based versions of other oppressive ideologies have to some extent come to replace the biological or nature-based versions that predominated until the mid-twentieth century. This is one potential danger of employing the effects-of-slavery strategy and similar strategies conceding that oppression has made members of oppressed groups

idea to oppose immediate abolition, but rather to motivate measures that would enable recently freed people adjust to life in freedom.⁴⁰ Other authors do, however. For instance, Benjamin Rush claims that immediate abolition could have disastrous effects because some enslaved people are unfit for freedom (1773: 19–20). Thus, he proposes that American colonies should abolish slavery gradually by educating enslaved children and placing time limits on their service (1773: 20). Those who are unfit for freedom should remain in slavery, “for the good of society” (1773: 20). Rush appears to combine the doctrine that enslavement renders enslaved people unfit for liberty with a normative principle that justifies depriving people who are unfit for liberty of their liberty. The normative principle he has in mind presumably aims to protect society from morally and intellectually damaged individuals who are either a danger to society or likely to become a public burden because they cannot provide for themselves.⁴¹

Thomas Jefferson makes a similar point but uses a paternalist normative principle, perhaps because he does not believe that slavery causes moral damage: “as far as I can judge from the experiments which have been made, to give liberty to, or rather, to abandon persons whose habits have been formed in slavery is like abandoning children” (letter to Bancroft, January 26, 1789, 1958: 492). In other words, he appears to claim that it is morally justifiable, and perhaps even obligatory, to deprive those who are unfit for liberty of their liberty, for their own good.⁴² Some authors combine the two approaches and describe immediate abolition as contrary to the best interest of enslaved people and society as a whole. One example is the White French philosopher Marie Jean Antoine Nicolas Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet, who argues in his 1781 *Reflections on the Slavery of the Negroes*,

If the slaves in European colonies have become incapable of fulfilling the functions of free men—due to their upbringing, the stupidity [*abrutissement*] acquired in slavery, the corruption of manners, and as a necessary consequence of the vices and example of their masters—one . . . cannot

intellectually or morally inferior: defenders of oppressive institutions might adapt their argumentation so that it requires only the type of inferiority that has been conceded. This works best, of course, if they represent this acquired inferiority as quite resilient and as functioning almost like a natural inferiority. I thank John Harfouch for encouraging me to think about this problem.

40. In this respect, Franklin’s speech resembles the anonymous text *Tyrannical Libertymen*, which I mentioned earlier and which also proposes measures to ease the transition to freedom.

41. I thank Johan Olsthoorn for pushing me to spell out the normative principles that these types of arguments presuppose.

42. Jefferson, as mentioned earlier, hypothesizes that Black people are intellectually inferior to White people by nature, rather than merely as an effect of slavery. Yet in this passage he is invoking “habits . . . formed in slavery”—that is, traits acquired as a consequence of enslavement—as obstacles to emancipation.

grant the full exercise of rights to such people without the risk that they will do harm to others or to themselves. . . . By giving them their freedom abruptly, we would reduce them to misery. (Condorcet 2003: 14)⁴³

Some enslaved and formerly enslaved Black people in the eighteenth century voiced the paternalist version of this idea as well. One example is Jupiter Hammon, an enslaved author and poet from New York. In his 1787 *Address to the Negroes of New York*, he states, “I do not wish to be free. . . . [M]any of us, who are grown up slaves, and have always had masters to take care of us, should hardly know how to take care of ourselves; and it may be more for our own comfort to remain as we are” (1787: 12).⁴⁴ Similarly, Absalom Jones writes in a 1799 petition to the U.S. president and Congress, signed by Jones and seventy-three other free Black Philadelphians, “We do not ask for an immediate emancipation of all, knowing that the degraded state of many, and their want [i.e., lack] of education, would greatly disqualify for such a change” (in Porter 1995: 331/Lubert et al. 2016: 51).⁴⁵ It is not entirely clear, of course, whether these authors genuinely believe this, or whether they merely say it for strategic reasons.

6. Conclusion

Where does this leave us? We have seen that there are significant dangers to the effects-of-slavery strategy and the more general approach that explains disparities between demographic groups through the effects of oppression on the minds and characters of oppressed people. If we use this approach, we may inadvertently do more damage than good to the liberatory project that we are pursuing. This means that, at the very least, we must be careful about the contexts in which we use this strategy, and whenever we use it, we must find ways to guard against its potential dangers. Moreover, we should not be too quick to concede stereotypical character traits. For instance, we should not infer stereotypical negative character traits from specific types of behavior when better explanations of the behavior are available. At

43. We find the same point in Raynal’s *History of the Two Indies*, in a portion written by Diderot (bk 11, ch 24, §§51–52, 1780: 202/2020: 179–80).

44. A few pages later, Hammon notes that a common argument against abolition is “that we should not know how to take care of ourselves, and should take to bad courses. That we should be lazy and idle, and get drunk and steal” (1787: 18). He does not directly critique this argument, but merely appeals to free Black people not to confirm this worry by acting badly and thereby endangering the abolitionist cause. Jones and Allen make a very similar appeal (1794: 27).

45. The petition does, however, ask the U.S. government to “undo the heavy burdens, and prepare the way for the oppressed to go free, that every yoke may be broken” (Porter 1995: 331/Lubert et al. 2016: 51). James Forten, one of the signatories, explains in 1800 that the petition “has in view the diffusion of knowledge among the African race, by unfettering their thoughts, and giving full scope to the energy of their minds” (in Porter 1995: 333).

the same time, eighteenth-century debates show that the effects-of-slavery strategy can be effective and attractive in certain ways. It may also be independently plausible that enslavement has some of these effects on enslaved people. In fact, it can be a good way to illustrate just how detrimental and inhumane slavery is.⁴⁶

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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