

CUGOANO ON REDRESSING SLAVERY: THE DEMANDS OF LIBERTY

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Quobna Ottobah Cugoano's work from July 1787, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, defended redressing transatlantic slavery on principled grounds. To elucidate the arguments that make Cugoano radical in his context, this article compares Cugoano with his abolitionist contemporary Thomas Clarkson. Clarkson developed a social contract theory, claiming that mentality endows all humans with liberty as a natural right. Clarkson argued that abolishing the slave trade would lead to emancipation naturally over time. Cugoano disagreed with piecemeal redress in *Thoughts and Sentiments*. Cugoano envisioned legal redress to necessitate that all Afro-diasporic laborers be enfranchised, securing the conditions for a free community. By examining his vision for liberation, the article reconstructs Cugoano's idea of positive liberty as a social and common good. The social conception of liberty that Cugoano explores is an important contribution to the development of modern human rights.

Keywords: Ottobah Cugoano; Thomas Clarkson; political philosophy; liberty; natural rights; transatlantic slavery

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1 Introduction

During a period when theorists focused on the moral wrongness of slavery and piecemeal political reforms, Cugoano forwarded one of the earliest political theories targeting transatlantic slavery, encompassing the slave trade and colonial slavery. In July 1787, Cugoano theorized conditions to establish a free community through the legal enfranchisement of all Afro-diasporic laborers. He also defended principles that morally obligated the overthrow of colonial slavery. The title of his text, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, is deceptive regarding its scope.¹ His political concerns went beyond enslaved Africans, encompassing free Black colonial laborers, Indigenous peoples, and poor Whites. The text is about domination in general, focusing on chattel slavery and colonialism and their consequences on the social fabric across the transatlantic. Philosophers are now appreciating *Thoughts and Sentiments* despite its historical neglect.²

The article reconstructs Cugoano's social conception of liberty, contributing to the ongoing debate over the normative framework of his political philosophy. He argues that liberty should have two normative features beyond individual physical freedom. First, liberty should be a social good, valued by members of a political community; it is desirable and worth having when every member is socially incorporated. Second, liberty should be a common good in that all members should enjoy shared security.³ Cugoano stands out for exploring what it means to be free with others in conditions of systemic unfreedom. This article acknowledges the claim made by other scholars that Cugoano is a natural rights theorist in that he defends a necessary condition for liberty; i.e., humans are born with the negative right to be free from corporeal

1. Throughout the article, I abbreviate the 1787 text as *Thoughts and Sentiments* and the 1791 text as *The Nature of Servitude*. Cugoano's 1791 text, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery; Or the Nature of Servitude as Admitted by the Law of God Compared to the Modern Slavery of the Africans in the West Indies*, is a shortened version of the 1787 edition. I distinguish the 1787 text from the 1791 text based on the intended audience. The 1787 edition is directed to 'The Inhabitants of Great-Britain.' The 1791 text is directed to the Sons of Africa, as an 'Abstract, merely to convey Instructions to his oppressed Countrymen' (*Thoughts* 145). The 1791 edition also speaks in the first-person plural, inclusive pronoun 'we' (*Thoughts* 116).

2. Passages from his text are now included in a modern philosophy collection: Cugoano, Quobna Ottobah. 2024. *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*. In *A New Modern Philosophy: The Inclusive Anthology of Primary Sources*, edited by Gwendolyn Marshall and Susanne Sreedhar, 2nd ed., 760–69. New York: Routledge.

3. In a contemporary context, Philip Pettit presents this view of liberty as a communitarian ideal (Pettit, Philip. 1997. *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*, 120–26. Oxford: Clarendon Press).

bondage.⁴ But I complicate this picture by developing Cugoano's positive conception of liberty via natural rights discourse, employing a methodology that combines context and reconstruction to assess *Thoughts and Sentiments* as an abolitionist text. I understand the function of an abolitionist text to be a written form of political action aimed at possible political change.⁵ The meaning of abolitionist texts can be reconstructed to yield distinct political philosophies.

In this article, I do not challenge prior scholarship that situates Cugoano within the natural law tradition and Enlightenment discourse, alongside figures such as Locke and Kant.⁶ But I differ from most of the literature so far

4. Anthony Bogues claims that Cugoano has a 'radicalized version of natural rights,' comparing his commitments to Thomas Paine and Mary Wollstonecraft (Bogues, Anthony. 2003. "The Political Thought of Quobna Cugoano: Radicalized Natural Liberty." In *Black Heretics, Black Prophets: Radical Political Intellectuals*, 45. London and New York: Routledge). Chike Jeffers takes Cugoano as a unique natural rights theorist compared to Euro-modern thinkers. Jeffers maintains that 'Cugoano, I believe, represents modern Africana philosophy as a convergence of African and European intellectual trajectories' (Jeffers, Chike. 2018. "Rights, Race, and the Beginnings of Modern Africana Philosophy." In *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Race*, edited by C. Taylor, Linda Marín Alcoff, and Luvell Anderson, 138. New York: Routledge). I agree with Jeffers that we should explore traditions from Africa and the African diaspora to help us better understand Cugoano's intellectual formation and grasp how the idea of natural rights is a global idea. I am grateful to Jeffers for sharing his manuscript "Slavery, Freedom, and Equality: Cugoano and Locke on Natural Rights" with me.

5. See Skinner, Quentin. 2002. *Visions of Politics, Volume 1: Regarding Method*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

6. Robert Bernasconi interprets Cugoano as taking the Lockean argument on the executive power of the law of nature and to have 'successfully turned Locke's argument on its head' on the score of colonial slavery (Bernasconi, Robert. 2019. "Ottobah Cugoano's Place in the History of Political Philosophy: Slavery and the Philosophical Canon." In *Debating African Philosophy: Perspectives on Identity, Decolonial Ethics and Comparative Philosophy*, edited by George Hull, 36. London and New York: Routledge). Adam Dahl has reconstructed an interpretation of Cugoano's political philosophy as against 'Lockean natural law' (Dahl, Adam. 2020. "Creolizing Natural Liberty: Transnational Obligation in the Thought of Ottobah Cugoano." *The Journal of Politics* 82 (3): 908–20). Sankar Muthu defends Cugoano as a sociability theorist and frames Cugoano as in dialogue with Kant on the issue of unsocial sociability. According to Muthu, Cugoano and Kant share the commitment to envision a sociable community free from domination (Muthu, Sankar. 2023. "A Cosmopolitanism of Countervailing Powers: Resistance against Global Domination in the in the Political Thought of Immanuel Kant and Quobna Ottobah Cugoano." In *Cosmopolitanism and Enlightenment*, edited by Joan-Pau Rubiés and Neil Safier, 239–62. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). Aminah Hasan-Birdwell interprets Cugoano as disagreeing with the Grotian natural law tradition (Hasan-Birdwell, Aminah. Forthcoming. "Ottobah Cugoano on Chattel Slavery and the Moral Limitations of *Ius Gentium*." *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*). On Hasan-Birdwell's account of Cugoano, any form of servitude lacking a 'just reward' is unjust in virtue of natural law (*Thoughts* 35). For Cugoano, Grotian perfect slavery (*servitus perfecta*) is unjust. According to Johan Olsthoorn, Cugoano's justification of time-limited penal bondage focuses on social restoration and moral reformation. Olsthoorn understands redemption to be packed into Cugoano's penal theory, positioning him against Locke's account of absolute rights forfeiture and Kant's retributivism (Olsthoorn, Johan. Forthcoming. "The Problem of Penal Slavery in Quobna Ottobah Cugoano's Abolitionism." *Philosophers' Imprint*).

in that I maintain it is imperative to pay attention to the intellectuals Cugoano cites and with whom he wants to be in dialogue: Anthony Benezet, James Ramsay, Thomas Clarkson, and Granville Sharp. Scholarship has either focused too narrowly on *Thoughts and Sentiments* by itself without framing other positions Cugoano aims to challenge, or it has too quickly rushed to compare Cugoano with other canonical modern philosophers and risked imposing foreign problems on *Thoughts and Sentiments*. My goal is to approximate Cugoano's intentions and reconstruct his arguments on their own terms. I abstract his philosophical contributions from the debates that are raised in *Thoughts and Sentiments*. I hope to position Cugoano scholarship to compare his work more effectively with other modern theorists who critique the social ills of nations that practice slavery and colonialism.

I compare Cugoano and Clarkson for the purposes of this article. I look to Clarkson out of the abolitionists because he developed a robust conception of natural liberty as a congenital right to one's body and person. I use Cugoano's arguments for redressing transatlantic slavery to reconstruct his social conception of liberty. To theorize redressing an injustice, one must possess a driving vision of what ought to be secured for the sake of liberation. I present a dialogue on three issues:

- 1.1 The liberty of Africans as a natural right and the state of nature.
- 1.2 The extent and approach to redressing transatlantic slavery to secure liberty, considering whether it should be tackled piecemeal and if the abolition of the slave trade will lead to the end of colonial slavery naturally over time.
- 1.3 The permissibility of slave resistance or colonial overthrow to secure liberty.

This article is divided into three parts, systematically examining how Clarkson and Cugoano each address these issues focusing on the concept of liberty. I begin by looking at those texts by Clarkson that are concurrent with Cugoano's writings, notably, Clarkson's *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (1786) as Cugoano cites it throughout *Thoughts and Sentiments*, which was published in 1787. I address later writings by Clarkson to shed light on what is forward-looking in Cugoano. In the proceeding section, I reconstruct Cugoano's arguments around these problems about liberty from his *Thoughts and Sentiments*. The conclusion of the article restates the importance of reading Cugoano alongside Clarkson and summarizes their philosophical differences. It ends by posing the problems of moralization and paternalism to Cugoano's philosophy and suggests that engaging *Thoughts and Sentiments* is an opportunity to explore neglected problems in modern philosophy.

2 Thomas Clarkson

In this section, I reconstruct Clarkson's arguments on three issues. (2.1) In *An Essay on Slavery*, Clarkson develops a social contract theory to defend the liberty of Africans as an individual natural right. Clarkson further posited Africans to be in an uncivilized state of nature. (2.2) Contemporaneous with Cugoano's demands for legal enfranchisement, Clarkson defended ending transatlantic slavery piecemeal by abolishing the slave trade. Clarkson thought that the legal end of the slave trade would result in emancipation over time, relying on the idea of natural progress. Clarkson changed his views later in his life, expressing regret for reasons that illuminate Cugoano's *Thoughts and Sentiments*. (2.3) While Clarkson never defended any principles that obligated the overthrow of chattel slavery in the colonies, he argued that slave resistance was morally permissible in 1786.

2.1

Clarkson's *An Essay on Slavery* is an expansion of his Latin dissertation '*Anne liceat Invitos in Servitutem dare* [Is it right to make slaves of others against their will]?' originally written in 1785. He divides his *An Essay on Slavery* into three parts. The first part catalogs the different justifications and forms of slavery throughout history. The second part develops a social contract theory to attack the slave trade or commerce on principled grounds. The third part builds on the second dealing with the question of '*the subsequent slavery in the colonies, as founded on the [inequity] of the commerce*' (*Commerce* 56; 117; 239–40). The key conclusion Clarkson defends is that transatlantic and colonial slavers possess the bodies of enslaved Africans as a matter of fact, but they do not possess a right over the enslaved. Only consent can grant rights over persons, and mentality endows Africans with liberty as a natural right. By mentality, Clarkson refers to those mental capacities that endow human beings with moral properties such as self-possession and accountability. His position revolves around what I call his anti-commodification principle: it is normatively impossible that human liberty can be bought or sold.

In the second part of his text, Clarkson develops a social contract theory to posit liberty as a natural right. He adopts this theoretical framework in answering whether natural law agrees with the slavery that European nations practice against Africans (*Commerce* 55–6). Clarkson claims his intention is 'to inquire into the rise, nature, and design of government' (*Commerce* 56). As Clarkson puts it in a footnote, he wants to discover the 'foundation' of governments (*Commerce* 67n). A plausible interpretation of what Clarkson means by foundation is those

principles that endow any entity with legitimate political power. He communicates to any reader of the modern period that he will apply parallel principles to understanding legitimate political power and use them to distinguish between lawful servitude and unjust slavery.⁷

Clarkson frames liberty by way of a pre-social state of nature. This ‘first situation of mankind,’ he maintains, is nothing other than ‘a state of *dissociation* and *independence*,’ a ‘state of universal liberty,’ or the state of a person taken to be ‘unconnected with the rest of the world’ (*Commerce* 57; 62; 92). He interprets the natural to entail dissociation and independence, so the natural state of human persons is to be individuated. Clarkson charts the social progress from the first state of human persons to the formation of domestic relations, agrarian life, and finally, political hierarchy or ‘*subordinate society*’ (*Commerce* 60). The need for government is coterminous with the advent of the private property relation. ‘By the introduction of laws,’ Clarkson writes, ‘government would at once afford a security to the acquisitions of the industrious, and heal the intestine disorders of the community’ (*Commerce* 60). Government is the *de jure* power to legislate over other agents and the political community more generally.

Clarkson defines liberty and government in contrast to one another. He claims that ‘*liberty* is a *natural* [right], and *government* an *adventitious* right, because all men were originally free’ (*Commerce* 66). Liberty is a natural right, which is to say that liberty is a congenital property of human persons. The only way to forfeit liberty temporarily is through crime (See *Commerce* 80–3). Government is an adventitious right, in the sense that it is politically founded upon contingent acts of consent. Legitimate power cannot be secured through compulsion. Clarkson assumes human beings in their natural state to be prudential. Humans consent to political states of affairs only if it will promote their happiness. It is accordingly rational to consent to a state of affairs that will bring about happiness, concurring with the happiness of others who are also members of the social contract. The foundation of government is consent and the end of government is the maximization of happiness.

Given Clarkson’s thoughts on the original state of human persons and the nature of government, we can turn to his key principle. Clarkson forwards his anti-commodification principle against transatlantic slavery: ‘it is impossible, in the nature of things, that *liberty* can be *bought* or *sold*!’ (*Commerce* 70). In the face of real-existing transatlantic slavery, Clarkson must intend the modality of this principle as a normative one, not an ontological one. He understands this principle to attain legitimacy for experiential facts about mentality and theological reasons.

7. Clarkson follows the Grotian tradition in dividing slavery ‘into [the] voluntary and involuntary’ (*Commerce* 6). See Grotius, Hugo. 2005. *The Rights of War and Peace*, Volume 2. Edited by Richard Tuck, 557–58. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.

Mentality functions as an individuating principle and the source of rational personality. It is for this reason that the 'right to empire over brutes' is natural for they are 'void of reason' (*Commerce* 71). The 'right to empire over men' on the other hand is contingent because human beings are minded, endowing them with moral properties. Mentality grants humans with two things besides rational personality: possession of our person and accountability for our actions (*ibid.*). Clarkson uses these moral facts to argue that treating human persons like cattle is unjust. Chattel slavery presupposes that a master can possess all that can be attributed to the slave. But this is impermissible since 'the mind cannot be confined or bound: it will be free, though its mansion be beset with chains' (*Commerce* 70). No one can possess the mind of another human being, and we stand accountable for our actions.

Clarkson defends the same conclusion also on theological grounds. Chattel slavery betrays the idea that every agent will stand accountable for their actions. '[If] we are assured that mankind are to exist in a future state, and to give an account of those actions,' then this theological doctrine 'strikes at the very root of slavery' (*Commerce* 248). Clarkson puts it rhetorically: 'how can any man be justly called to an account for his actions, whose actions are not *at his own disposal?*' (*ibid.*). The case of chattel slavery is the case where a person's liberty is supposed to be 'absolutely bought and *appropriated*' (*ibid.*). It assumes that one's actions are not one's own. But God judges us as individuals.

I draw out Clarkson's conclusions from these arguments about government, mentality, and theology. Transatlantic and colonial slavers could not have the right to buy and sell African slaves. Instead, slavers merely possessed the bodies of Africans as a matter of fact. Given that Africans are minded individuals, Europeans violated their obligations to recognize the natural liberty of Africans. Moreover, chattel slavery was a practice that affronted natural religion and the idea that we will stand judged as individuals (See *Commerce* 115; 256). Consequently, the entire enterprise of transatlantic slavery lacked any legitimacy.

Clarkson's theory still has its problems. His understanding of liberty presupposes a thick pre-social state of nature. He claims that European enslavers 'invade the liberties of those, who...are in a state of *nature*, in a state of original *dissociation*, perfectly *independent*, perfectly *free*' (*Commerce* 76). On one level, we can understand this claim in a minimal or basic sense: Europeans and Africans are in a state of nature relative to each other. They ought to respect each other's natural rights. But Clarkson also uses the concept of the state of nature in an inflationary sense, couching it with notions of progress and development. By 'inflationary,' I mean that Clarkson conceives of the state of nature as a primitive stage that societies progress beyond. This is evident when Clarkson says that 'Africans are torn from their country in a state of nature,' and elaborates that Africans are 'mostly in a savage state' (*Commerce* 167–68). Clarkson mobilizes

these observations to defend the natural capacity for Africans to progress and become on par with Europeans. The point is that Clarkson employs an inflationary conception of the state of nature and argues that Africans are at a more primitive stage of social development.

To summarize, Clarkson develops a social contract theory to argue that liberty is a natural right. He argues that mentality grants human beings with liberty. He explores the meaning of liberty in terms of individual self-possession and possession of actions. It is impermissible in his view for liberty to be commodified. Any legitimate political community is one that respects the individuation of human persons, their bodily freedom, and their capacity to consent. By focusing on liberty as a natural right grounded in a pre-social state of nature, Clarkson neglected to consider the legal and social rights Africans already had within their communities. He viewed Africans not as progressed in comparison to Europeans. In the next section, I connect these claims to Clarkson's vision for redress.

2.2

During the same period as Cugoano's *Thoughts and Sentiments*, Clarkson reasoned that abolitionists should aim only at the legal abolition of the slave trade. He published essays that built on his 1786 work: *A Summary View of the Slave Trade and the Probable Consequences of its Abolition* (1787) and *An Essay on the Impolicy of the African Slave Trade* (1788). He described the main contribution of his 1786 essay to be its moral theory of 'the injustice and inhumanity of the slave-trade' (*Summary* 8; cf. *Impolicy* 3). Clarkson understood all his texts to support each other to favor the abolition of the slave trade for moral and political reasons.

Clarkson first defended a piecemeal approach to redressing transatlantic slavery. This position is not reducible to pragmatics. David Brion Davis has claimed that, within the British abolitionist context, 'the tactical decision to attack the slave trade carried profound ideological meaning.'⁸ In my view, Clarkson's focus on the slave trade also reflected principles that had philosophical import.

Clarkson framed the injustice of transatlantic slavery in terms of root causes. In *An Essay on Slavery*, he frames his major argument against transatlantic slavery as such. He develops a social contract theory to attack the slave trade and uses this conclusion to assess colonial slavery (*Commerce* 56; 117; 239–40). The injustice of the slave trade included direct acts of murder, kidnapping, and captivity. Colonial slavery was the morally illegitimate but legally tolerated institution founded upon transatlantic enslavement.

8. Davis, David Brion. 1999. *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823*, 417. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Clarkson motivated redressing transatlantic slavery by focusing on the slave trade, positing that the abolition of the slave trade would be striking at the root of the whole evil (*History of Abolition* 1: 286–87; *Ultimate Emancipation* 1). William Wilberforce would adopt the same view and would claim in a speech from 1789 that the slave trade was the spring of all the evils of transatlantic slavery.⁹ Davis makes the point that Clarkson and other abolitionists focused on the commission of injustice rather than the institutional occasions for injustice.¹⁰ In other words, in the case of Clarkson, he concentrated on the root causes of transatlantic slavery but intentionally neglected engaging with the broader social and institutional injustices beyond the slave trade. I emphasize the intentional nature of this decision because Granville Sharp pressed against Clarkson and other White abolitionists for adopting these views about the slave trade in 1787.¹¹

Clarkson grounded his vision for redress in the idea of progress. He sincerely believed that abolishing the slave trade would initiate a change in morals in England and the British colonies. Emancipation would gradually happen without the need for legal intervention. In light of the end of the slave trade, he thought that slave-masters would be naturally incentivized to emancipate their slaves. Clarkson described emancipation as a plant that would naturally arise from the ashes of the abolished slave trade (*History of Abolition* 2: 586).

Later, Clarkson came to regret his views about the natural progress of emancipation, and his reasons are illuminating for interpreting Cugoano's *Thoughts and Sentiments*:

2.2.1 In 1815, Clarkson came to the 'melancholy lesson' that emancipation would not happen without legal intervention, claiming that 'legislative authority is actually necessary to produce so desirable an end [to

9. William Wilberforce's speech, and the ensuing debate over his resolutions, can be found in Wilberforce, William. 1816. *The Parliamentary History of England from the Earliest Period to the Year 1803*, Volume 28, 41–101. London: Printed by T.C. Hansard.

10. Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, 417.

11. Prince Hoare narrates a 1787 event where the goals of what would become *The Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade* were debated: 'Of ten persons who were present, Granville stood *singly* for including the abolition of slavery in the title of the Society. "As slavery," [Sharp] asserted, "was as much a crime against the Divine laws as the *Slave Trade*, it became the Committee to exert themselves equally against the continuance of both; and he did not hesitate to pronounce all present *guilty before God*, for shutting those, who were then slaves all the world over, out of the pale of their approaching labours' (*Memoirs of Granville Sharp* 415). Sharp reflects on the matter in 1807: 'The worthy promoters of the Bill for the *Abolition of the Slave-Trade*, have generally conceived (with exception to myself) that there was no necessity to bring forward the farther question respecting the illegality of Slavery in the Colonies, because they wished for a *gradual Abolition* of the Colonial oppression, hoping that, if the *Trade was abolished*, some prudent regulations would of course be soon adopted to supersede the other' (*System of Colonial Law* 7). *The System of Colonial Law*" Compared with the *Eternal Laws of God: And with the Indispensable Principles of the English Constitution*, 7. London: Printed by Richard Edwards.

colonial slavery].¹² Redress needed to focus on the legal and social rights of enslaved Africans. Over thirty years after 1787, Clarkson changed his published views to support gradual emancipation by legal means in his *Thoughts on the Necessity of Improving the Condition of the Slaves in the British Colonies with a View to their Ultimate Emancipation* (1823).

- 2.2.2 Clarkson originally hoped that the abolition of the slave trade would inspire better treatment of slaves. But the reality of the outcome was that the treatment of slaves was just ‘as rigid and cruel’ as before the abolition of the slave trade.¹³ Clarkson did not account for the social fact that those who wield ‘arbitrary power’ over others are unlikely to relinquish it voluntarily.¹⁴ As Clarkson puts it in a letter dated to 1830, there are consequences to ‘unlimited power on the human mind.’¹⁵ The upshot is that we are not the kind of creatures to part voluntarily with absolute power once we possess it.
- 2.2.3 Clarkson did not reckon with the social fact that tolerance of chattel slavery over Africans would lead to racial sedimentation. He did not consider the possibility that ‘black skin’ would serve ‘as the badge of slavery.’¹⁶ European colonialists came to associate the Black color of Africans as a social signifier for degraded labor whether one was in chains or not.
- 2.2.4 Clarkson did not reckon with the economic foundation of the plantation system. The plantation economy was structured to necessitate brutal slave labor. Without active legal intervention, plantation masters would seek to procure Black slave labor through extra-legal means.¹⁷ Legal measures were required to change and secure conditions for the dignity of labor.

Clarkson was forced to abandon his original view that placed hope in the abolition of the slave trade as sparking progress. Progress, as an idea, was of no emancipatory use. Liberation from Caribbean slavery would not happen naturally.

12. Clarkson, Thomas. 1815. “Paper...to interfere for better treatment of negroes in W. Indies,” Thomas Clarkson papers, 1787–1847, mssCN 56, Box 1, Folder 37, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

13. Clarkson. 1815. “Paper...to interfere for better treatment of negroes in W. Indies.”

14. Clarkson, Thomas. 1914. Letter to Edward Wilcox, January 28, 1830. In *Catalogue, Issue 329*, 20. London: Maggs Bros. Limited.

15. Clarkson. 1914. Letter to Edward Wilcox, January 28, 1830.

16. Clarkson. 1914. Letter to Edward Wilcox, January 28, 1830.

17. Clarkson. 1914. Letter to Edward Wilcox, January 28, 1830.

2.3

Clarkson's thoughts evolved on the issue of the permissibility of resistance. In his *An Essay on Slavery* from 1786, he defended principles that authorized slave resistance. In a key passage from 1786, he gives the following argument:

Let us suppose then, that in consequence of the *commerce* you were forced into a ship; that you were conveyed to another country; that you were sold there; that you were confined to incessant labour...would you not think that you had a right to resist their treatment? Would you not resist it with a safe conscience? And would you not be surprised, if your resistance should be termed rebellion?—By the former premises you must answer, yes. —Such then is the case with the wretched *Africans*. They have a right to resist your proceedings. They can resist them, and yet they cannot justly be considered as rebellious. For though we suppose them to have been guilty of crimes to one another; though we suppose them to have been the most abandoned and execrable of men, yet are they perfectly innocent with respect to you *receivers* (*Commerce* 241).

Clarkson forwards a thought experiment to justify the conclusion of his argument. He presents to his readers the case of them becoming trafficked and enslaved. He assumes that reason would lead one to assert their right to resist and secure their own corporeal freedom. What is interesting about this passage is that Clarkson is mobilizing the concept of a state of nature in a minimal sense. Even if it is the case that Africans were guilty of crimes, with respect to Europeans, Africans must be treated as entitled to their liberty as a natural right. The conclusion of his argument is that slave resistance is morally permissible. His claim about slave resistance is that it is a negative natural right and not a positive obligatory claim; i.e., Clarkson's conclusion is not that the enslaved *ought* to resist. Later, in 1792, within *The True State of the Case, Respecting the Insurrection at St. Domingo*, Clarkson distanced himself and the abolitionist movement from political endorsement of the Haitian slave insurrection, which sparked fear in the European imagination (*Insurrection* 2, 8). He used this fear to press the abolition of the slave trade (*Insurrection* 8). Much later, once Clarkson adopted pacifism in response to the Napoleonic wars, he advocated for non-resistance in ending colonial slavery. In his last published work on Caribbean slavery from 1823, Clarkson argued that emancipation ought to be enacted the first moment it is practicable, practicable without danger, and such that it is beneficial for all parties involved (*Ultimate Emancipation* 15–6). While going through examples of emancipation, he uses the Haitian insurrection as a negative model to define his vision for safe and gradual emancipation (See *Ultimate Emancipation* 22–33).

Clarkson attempted to reassure Caribbean planters that gradual legal emancipation would be beneficial for them, appealing to the fact that Africans were ‘malleable at the European will’ (*Ultimate Emancipation* 42).¹⁸

Clarkson never defended principles that obligated colonial overthrow. He claimed privately that slave owners and colonial legislatures needed to be forced to listen to reason. But his intended claim was that both legal intervention and ‘the public Voice’ needed to be the forces for emancipatory change.¹⁹

3 Ottobah Cugoano

In this section, I reconstruct Cugoano’s arguments on three issues. (3.1) In *Thoughts and Sentiments*, Cugoano argues that Africans are entitled to liberty as a natural right, entailing the right to be a social being. His theory does not presuppose a pre-social state of nature. (3.2) In 1787, Cugoano envisioned redress to necessitate that all Afro-diasporic people be legally enfranchised, securing the conditions for a free community. (3.3) Cugoano defended principles that obligated colonial overthrow if the conditions for liberty were not secured. Cugoano moralized insurrection since overthrowing chattel slavery must abide by the moral parameters of justice and divine law. (3.4) I conclude that, with his *Thoughts and Sentiments*, Cugoano arrives at a social conception of liberty goes beyond concerns with corporeal freedom.

3.1

The beginning of *Thoughts and Sentiments* presents justice as restoring to diasporic Africans ‘the common rights of nature’ (*Thoughts* 9). Cugoano theorizes his arguments in terms of natural rights, privileges, and common rights (See, e.g., *Thoughts* 11; 21–2; 28; 38; 61; 71; 91). It is God who has endowed every human creature with the natural right to liberty (*Thoughts* 97). I take it for granted that an uncontroversial interpretation of these passages is that Cugoano agrees with Clarkson that liberty is a natural right. Human beings have the congenital right to their corporeal freedom. I will not explore the metaphysics of liberty in Cugoano since he shows little interest in this approach. I will also not recycle what

18. In 1824, Elizabeth Heyrick targeted Clarkson and other gradualists, arguing that they were too willing to accommodate the interests of the Caribbean planters (Heyrick, Elizabeth. 1824. *Immediate, Not Gradual Abolition Or, An Inquiry Into the Shortest, Safest, and Most Effectual Means of Getting Rid of West Indian Slavery*. London).

19. Clarkson. 1815. “Paper...to interfere for better treatment of negroes in W. Indies.”

other scholars already have done and show that Cugoano is a natural rights theorist.²⁰

I focus on two underexplored points in scholarship to contrast Cugoano and Clarkson. First, Cugoano thinks Africans were socially degraded and not simply deprived of corporeal freedom. Both enslaved and free Africans were disenfranchised from their normative standing as social beings. Second, he does not rely on the idea of a pre-social state of nature.²¹ Liberty as a natural right entails not just individual bodily possession but the right to be a social being. These points of contrast will put us in a position to appreciate the significance of his 1787 demands for liberation either through redress as the legal enfranchisement of Africans or colonial overthrow.

Cugoano draws attention to the social dispossession of Africans when he reflects on the Zong massacre of 1781, describing it as ‘a very shocking, peculiar, and almost unheard of conception’ (*Thoughts* 85). He identifies two primary ways the British instigators of slavery treated Africans: ‘they either consider them as their own property, that they may do with as they please, in life or death; or the taking away the life of a black man is of no more account than taking away the life of a beast’ (*ibid.*). Cugoano highlights two aspects of oppression: alleging to possess property rights over enslaved Africans and the racial dehumanization of Africans. It might be easily overlooked, but in discussing the first aspect, he specifically addresses the status of enslaved Africans, whereas the second concerns the social valuation of any African’s life. Racial dehumanization was an outgrowth of property dehumanization.

Cugoano elaborates on these points to draw out a social thesis. In the context of the Zong case, he engaged the legal arguments,²² writing that ‘[their] argument was, that the slaves were to be considered the same as horses; and their plea for throwing them into the sea was nothing better than that it might be more necessary to throw them overboard to lighten their vessel [for] goods

20. See, e.g., Bagues, “The Political Thought of Quobna Cugoano: Radicalized Natural Liberty,” and Jeffers, “Rights, Race, and the Beginnings of Modern Africana Philosophy.”

21. Bagues also interprets Cugoano as rejecting the idea of a pre-social state of nature: “The Political Thought of Quobna Cugoano: Radicalized Natural Liberty,” 35, 44.

22. The Solicitor General John Lee defended the legal claim of insurance compensation on behalf of the owners of the Zong. He begins his argument by observing that ‘a part of our fellow Creatures of the Negro Cast are (wisely or unwisely) made the Subject of Property by Our Law there is no doubt about it [...] they are real Property & part of a descendable Inheritance in the Provinces belonging to us in the West Indies & this [insurance] Policy assumes it.’ Lee continued, ‘[Throwing an African slave overboard] is the Case of throwing over Goods; for to this purpose, & the purpose of this Insurance, they are Goods & property and whether right or wrong we have nothing to do with &c.’ The conclusion of his argument was that there was an absolute necessity for the atrocity of Africans to prevent ‘an Insurrection [where] All blacks would have killed All the Whites’ (The transcription of the legal proceeding can be found in *Gregson v. Gilbert*, 2017. In *Granville Sharp’s Cases on Slavery*, edited by Andrew Lyall, 244–76. Portland: Hart Publishing).

of greater value' (*Thoughts* 85). He forwards a conclusion having in view how Africans were treated as goods and how those who engaged in marronage were hunted like animals: 'our lives are accounted of no value' (*Thoughts* 85). Africans were deprived of corporeal freedom through enslavement. But both enslaved and free Africans were dominated without legal and social consequences. Cugoano draws out his social thesis from observing how Africans were dispossessed of value: the liberty of Africans entails their right to be social creatures.

Cugoano's theory of liberty extends beyond Clarkson's focus on individual self-possession and actions to encompass the broader transatlantic social fabric. It is for this reason that Cugoano articulates his concerns for both enslaved and free Africans through the moral language of privileges and common rights and not simply natural rights. In an illuminating letter from 1791, he makes a global claim that the inhuman distinction of colors had spread itself over the geographical North (*Thoughts* 196). He also highlights in the same letter how free Blacks found themselves as "worse off" than slaves because Whites refused to assign proper value to their goods, barring them from trade and undermining their livelihood (*ibid.*). These ideas ground his position that among 'the European seafaring people in general,' 'a Black Man is scarcely ever safe' (*Thoughts* 106).

His social thesis encompasses how oppressive slavers were legally protected. Cugoano, as Johan Olsthoorn has argued, defends justifications of time-limited penal bondage by virtue of divine law.²³ But Cugoano also observes that the penal architecture of colonial slavery operates through a distorted application of divine law (*Thoughts* 57). Authorization of punishment for crimes was distorted in the sense that Africans were murderously punished, whereas oppressive European slavers went unpunished. European colonial powers extended protection through law and government over those slavers who dispossessed Africans of their social standing (*Thoughts* 71).

Cugoano accordingly flips the charge of savagery on its head against Clarkson and other theorists who make similar claims. The European colonial powers who practiced transatlantic slavery, not the Africans, are the ones who exhibit 'unsociableness' (*Thoughts* 22–3). Africans appreciate their social privileges and liberty just like any other people in the world (*Thoughts* 28). Cugoano posed to his European readers more forcefully than Clarkson that the so-called most civilized nations were also the ones with the greatest social ills. Not even the spread of Christianity can serve as a theodicean justification (*Thoughts* 24). Cugoano argues on the basis of African civilization that 'we may boast of some more essential liberties than any of the civilized nations in Europe enjoy' (*Thoughts*

23. Olsthoorn, Johan. "The Problem of Penal Slavery in Quobna Ottobah Cugoano's Abolitionism."

103). He diagnosed European colonialists as degrading themselves, and that the state of political communities in the colonies was intolerably unsociable.

Cugoano does not ground his conception of liberty in a pre-social state of nature. No passage within *Thoughts and Sentiments* operates through the idea of a pre-social state of nature that agents leave to bring about political order. For him, there is one divine order of nature: ‘God alone... established the course of nature’ (*Thoughts* 29). The normative import of his claim is that humans have the right to pursue sociable relations with each other in accordance with the order of nature (See, e.g., *Thoughts* 29; 51). His vision for a cosmopolitan community is a community that encompasses the entire variety of human skin colors, free from all forms of dehumanization. In the one passage where Cugoano describes political transition, he narrates his social alienation from his Fante community, descending from ‘a state of innocence and freedom’ and into ‘a state of horror and slavery’ (*Thoughts* 15). He goes from a sociable condition to one that lacks any consideration for his normative standing as a social creature. His conception of liberty entails the positive right to be a social entity.

3.2

Cugoano disagrees with Clarkson’s piecemeal approach to redressing transatlantic slavery, defending his own vision for redress for principled reasons. In this section, I further develop Cugoano’s social conception of liberty, which determines his argument for legal enfranchisement.

Cugoano rejected the root cause idea for redressing transatlantic slavery. He presented transatlantic slavery to be intolerable and that ‘the whole, or any part of that iniquitous traffic of slavery, can no where, or in any degree, be admitted,’ and ‘the whole may easily appear in every part’ (*Thoughts* 10). Again, he reflects ‘ought not the whole of [the traffic], and all the branches of such exceeding evil and wicked traffic, and all the iniquity of it to be relinquished, and root and branches to speedily given up and put an end to?’ (*Thoughts* 77). Legal redress respectively ought to aim at the whole of transatlantic slavery. He did not think that abolishing the slave trade would lead to natural emancipation over time.

Cugoano presented a comprehensive vision for legal redress: ‘total *abolition*, and an universal *emancipation* of slaves, and the *enfranchisement* of all the Black People...without any hesitation, or delay for a moment [my emphasis]’ (*Thoughts* 91). Scholars have criticized the proposals at the end of *Thoughts and Sentiments*,²⁴

24. See, e.g., Gunn, Jeffrey. 2010. “Creating a Paradox: Quobna Ottobah Cugoano and the Slave Trade’s Violation of Principles of Christianity, Reason, and Property Ownership.” *Journal of World History* 21 (4): 651; Wheelock, Stefan M. 2016. *Barbaric Culture and Black Critique: Black Antislavery Writers, Religion, and the Slaveholding Atlantic*, 55–8. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.

with Keith Sandiford describing them as discretionary rather than as radical.²⁵ What is particularly objectionable to some scholars is Cugoano's seven-year plan to transform the slave plantation community into a free-laboring one. These scholars neglect to appreciate his abolitionist demands in his context. Today, we simply take for granted political insights from the abolitionist tradition, but these insights were fiercely debated in Cugoano's context. His plan leaves nothing to natural progress in comparison to Clarkson. Cugoano presented a form of legal redress that would actively intervene and attempt to repair the social fabric of a community that has tolerated chattel slavery.²⁶ His plan demanded the immediate transformation of slave labor to 'sociable servitude,' that is to say, 'lawful servitude' without 'tortures and oppression' (*Thoughts* 51; 98). If any owner did not provide suitable instruction for an ex-slave, then the laborer should be taken away and assigned to another to instruct them (*Thoughts* 99). The point was to secure the social conditions that recognized the dignity of African labor.

What is particularly unique to Cugoano is his demands for enfranchisement. We can understand the philosophical import of this demand through his conception of liberty. Cugoano pressed more than Clarkson that liberty which rests on oppression is not the kind of liberty that is desirable nor is it secure politically. Cugoano's vision for liberation bears not just on enslaved and free Africans but also on those Europeans who were citizens of colonial powers. His *Thoughts and Sentiments* directs its arguments not to 'the Parliament of Great Britain,' as Olaudah Equiano does in March of 1789, but to 'the Inhabitants of Great-Britain' (*Narrative* 7; *Thoughts* 1).

In comparison to Clarkson's focus on the violation of natural rights in the slave trade, Cugoano pressed African enfranchisement on his British reader. If Britons remained bystanders to African unfreedom, then their liberty would be nothing other than the freedom of robbers. If Britons tolerated laws that allowed slavers to disenfranchise a whole portion of the political community, then the law of their community was ultimately Thrasymachian.

The philosophical kernel of Cugoano's arguments is that liberty attains consistency or honesty only in so far as it is secured for the whole community as enfranchised. Liberty is merely 'vaunted' if one is within a community that tolerates disenfranchisement (*Thoughts* 10). If one finds themselves in a community that enacts 'laws for tolerating slavery and wickedness,' Cugoano reasons, 'if you give it a sanction by your passive obedience, [then] it manifests that you have gone

25. Sandiford, Keith A. 1988. "Ottobah Cugoano: The Appeal to Religion and the Intellectual Self." In *Measuring the Moment: Strategies of Protest in Eighteenth-Century Afro-English Writing*, 115. Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press.

26. Cugoano's model of redress translates to what Roy L. Brooks calls the atonement model of reparations (Brooks, Roy L. 2004. *Atonement and Forgiveness: A New Model for Black Reparations*, 141–79. Berkeley: University of California Press).

over to those brutish enemies of mankind' (*Thoughts* 95). His basic intuition on this issue is that if someone disavows their obligation by remaining passive, then that agent is 'a conniver and confederator' in the injustice (*Thoughts* 95).

It is a duty, Cugoano writes, 'for an *honest* community of men to get out of the hands of rogues and villains [my emphasis]' (*Thoughts* 59). The liberty of Britons was at stake if they did not fight for enfranchisement. In another passage, he elaborates why:

It may be feared that if these unconstitutional laws, reaching from Great-Britain to her colonies, be long continued in and supported, to the carrying on that horrible and wicked traffic of slavery, must at last mark out the whole of the British constitution with ruin and destruction and that the most generous and tenacious people in the world for liberty, may also at last be reduced to slaves (*Thoughts* 70).

While Cugoano has in mind divine judgment in this argument, he also presents a political intuition. His idea is that liberty is secure only when it is extended to all members of a community. If liberty is acquired only at the cost of disenfranchisement, then there is nothing to prevent the inverse from occurring. For a community to maintain integrity in its moral language of rights, then these rights ought to be extended to every member. Legal toleration and inaction concerning disenfranchisement entail that the entire community cannot claim itself to be free with honesty. It is rather a community that is free only as rogues and villains; i.e., 'the laws of [such a] society is for every one to catch what he can' (*Thoughts* 87). Britons and their constitution were marked out for their lack of consistency.

In comparison to Clarkson's vision of redress, Cugoano pressed beyond the issue of the slave trade and drove the issue of slavery back to the Britons themselves. A people should aspire to be free such that their liberty is not founded upon the unfreedom of others.

3.3

Cugoano agrees with Clarkson on the question of a negative natural right to resistance. But Cugoano also defends principles that obligate the overthrow of colonial slavery. He reminded his British reader that if they failed to secure conditions that respected the liberty of Africans, then it was a moral obligation for Africans to restore their own liberty, and secure conditions such that chattel slavery in the colonies would be punished. The central passage in *Thoughts and Sentiments* reads:

Therefore, if there was no other way to deliver a man from slavery, but by enslaving his master, it would be lawful for him to do so if he was able, for this would be doing justice to himself, and be justice as the law requires, to chastise his master for enslaving of him wrongfully (*Thoughts* 59).

Cugoano starts his argument with a last-resort condition. One can enslave another agent only if there are no other means by which to escape slavery. Cugoano further moralizes the liberating action, as it cannot be for the sake of revenge (*Thoughts* 52). What ought to be action-guiding is justice, not simply liberation. The import of justice in this case is twofold. First, the enslaved dignifies herself by asserting her normative standing as a human being. Cugoano's intuition seems to be that the slaver needs to recognize that the enslaved can exercise proportional power over him if the conditions allow it. Second, the enslaved is morally obligated to show that the slaver has done wrong. This second aspect of justice is meant to show the slaver that arbitrary punishment of human beings is intolerable and demands rectification. As Cugoano writes earlier in the text, 'the laws of God and man require that [enslavers] should be suppressed, and deprived of their liberty, or perhaps their lives' (*Thoughts* 51). Interestingly, Cugoano, along with the Sons of Africa, thank Granville Sharp in a letter from 1788 for his writings, and they collectively promote 'to restrain the avaricious invaders of the rights and liberties of men' (*Thoughts* 188).²⁷ The point is that Cugoano did not arrive at his moralized position in isolation.

27. The full scope of intellectual collaboration between Sharp and Cugoano remains to be determined. The two of them knew each other personally by the time Cugoano was drafting *Thoughts and Sentiments* in 1786. Besides his direct quotations from *The Law of Retribution*, Cugoano adopts an argument regarding legal redress from Sharp. Sharp's argument is contained in a private letter that Sharp sent to the Prime Minister of Great-Britain, Lord North, in February 1772. Cugoano's claim that 'to be in power, and to neglect even a day in endeavouring to put a stop to such monstrous iniquity and abandoned wickedness... must necessarily endanger a man's own eternal welfare, be he ever so great in temporal dignity' is a direct quotation of Sharp's letter (*Thoughts* 80; *Memoirs of Granville Sharp* 79). In this 1772 letter, Sharp *privately* demands redress not just for African slaves but for Indigenous slaves and poor Whites. Cugoano weaves his sources from both Sharp and Clarkson in this passage on page 80 of *Thoughts and Sentiments* to defend his own conclusion: 'it is both evident and expedient, that there is an absolute necessity to abolish the slave trade, and the West-India slavery' (*Thoughts* 80). Vincent Carretta, however, claims the entire quote is unidentifiable (See *Thoughts* 80n141). Since Sharp also shares this letter to Lord North with Anthony Benezet in August of 1772, and Sharp emphasizes the private nature of the letter, this raises a substantial and underexplored possibility for Cugoano scholarship: the direct and significant collaboration between Cugoano and Sharp (See *Memoirs of Granville Sharp* 102). I speculatively conclude that Cugoano, in the midst of drafting *Thoughts and Sentiments*, had access to a significant array of Sharp's writings.

Though overthrowing chattel slavery in the colonies does not immediately promote a free community, Cugoano believes that certain minimal moral conditions must be met. Treating persons like chattel is intolerable and cannot be gradually reformed. He did not live to witness the Haitian insurrection, but the moral principles from *Thoughts and Sentiments* serve as the place for his response.

3.4

In 1787, Cugoano refused to decide the future. He wrote that it was not up to him to predict the revolution that would be the end of slavery (*Thoughts* 61). He outlined two moral paths toward liberation: first, by Britons agitating for the enactment of legal enfranchisement and the creation of conditions for sociable servitude in the colonies; or second, through ‘the destruction and overthrow of all the transgressors’ who violate divine law (*ibid.*).

Cugoano arrived at a social conception of liberty in presenting these paths. Liberty has two normative conditions beyond corporeal freedom: it ought to be a social good and a common good. Cugoano thinks that liberty as a natural right entails the right to be a social creature. The transatlantic political community ought to value the liberty of Africans and address their disenfranchisement. His conception of liberty bears upon free Britons as well. Freedom that rests on disenfranchisement is not the kind of liberty that is socially desirable. It is not socially desirable because then one’s liberty is neither honest nor consistent. By a lack of honesty or consistency, Cugoano means that one is free only at the cost of the unfreedom of others. Second, he argues that liberty should be a common good in the sense that liberty ought to be secured as a common right. Freedom founded upon disenfranchisement is not politically secure. Any people undergoing disenfranchisement can assert their moral obligation to retaliate. Cugoano thought liberty ought to be a good of common security for both Africans and Europeans. For Africans, this required the security of legal and social conditions for their labor and protection against arbitrary punishment. For free Britons, it entailed the obligation to stand in solidarity with the struggle of Africans and create conditions of common security.

The positive conception of liberty that Cugoano arrives at unites several of his arguments. It brings together a cluster of arguments that not only bear upon the disenfranchisement of Africans but also pertain to his many arguments concerning the deprivation of ‘the poor and needy of their *right* [my emphasis]’ and the political conditions under which both Black and White laborers can live ‘without being oppressed’ (*Thoughts* 91). He asserts that any nation claiming to ‘boast of liberty’ is obligated to provide economic security (*Thoughts* 103). It is

from this interpretative vantage point that one can understand his defense of African civilization against Europe because, as he writes about African civil society, 'the poorest amongst us are never in distress for want' (*Thoughts* 103). My position is that these arguments are united by Cugoano's political philosophy.

4 Conclusion

This article has compared Cugoano and Clarkson for straightforward reasons. We should compare Cugoano and Clarkson because it is a way to bring into relief what is forward-looking in *Thoughts and Sentiments*. It is for this same reason that I looked at Clarkson's later abolitionist writings. The second reason is that Cugoano frequently quotes Clarkson's *An Essay on Slavery*. Cugoano constructs *Thoughts and Sentiments* as a political dialogue, challenging other abolitionist arguments by Benezet, Ramsay, Clarkson, and Sharp. I pay attention to their arguments because Cugoano does.

I summarize three key points about liberty in Cugoano and Clarkson:

4.1 *Liberty and the State of Nature*

- a. In *An Essay on Slavery* from 1786, Clarkson develops a social contract theory to defend the liberty of Africans as a natural right. He frames liberty through a pre-social state of nature. It is impermissible in Clarkson's view for liberty to be commodified because mentality grants human beings with liberty; liberty entails individual corporeal possession and possession of actions. God judges us as individuals, and a just political community reflects these facts.
- b. Cugoano agrees with Clarkson that liberty is a natural right. But Cugoano does not ground his conception of liberty in a pre-social state of nature. Liberty entails the right to be a social creature. Liberty, he thinks, ought to have two normative features besides individual corporeal freedom: it ought to be a social good and a common good. His positive conception of liberty has in view not only enslaved Africans but also free Africans, Britons, and poor laborers.

4.2 *Redressing Transatlantic Slavery*

- a. Clarkson adopted a piecemeal plan to end transatlantic slavery. He argued to end it by legally abolishing the slave trade. He took on a root

cause approach and paired it with the belief that emancipation would happen naturally over time and without legal intervention. Clarkson regretted these views later in his life for reasons that pertained to the nature of absolute domination, racism, and plantation labor.

- b. In 1787, Cugoano rejected a piecemeal approach to redressing transatlantic slavery. He did not just argue for the abolition of the slave trade and legal emancipation, but he also advocated for the legal enfranchisement of all Afro-diasporic people. He pressed upon his British readers that their liberty was also at stake in securing communal conditions for African enfranchisement.

4.3 *Resistance and Overthrow*

- a. Clarkson's position evolved on the issue of the permissibility of slave resistance. In his *An Essay on Slavery* from 1786, he defended the negative natural right to resist enslavement. In 1792, he distanced himself from the Haitian insurrection. Later, once he was a pacifist, Clarkson advocated for safe and gradual emancipation through legal means.
- b. Within *Thoughts and Sentiments*, Cugoano agreed with Clarkson that slaves had the negative natural right to resist. But Cugoano also defended principles that positively obligated colonial overthrow. In accordance with justice and divine law, the enslaved were morally obligated to liberate themselves from chattel slavery and chastise their slavers for arbitrary punishment.

I end this article by raising problems. First, how much weight do we want to place on Cugoano's moral principles? This is a problem for anyone who engages arguments not just from *Thoughts and Sentiments* but also from David Walker's *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World, But in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America*, originally published in 1829. Walker argued that African American slaves were morally obligated to secure the conditions for their own freedom: it is a 'duty to try every scheme.'²⁸ He thought that not only slaves but free African Americans were obligated to change how they conceived of themselves and assert their dignity in the face of racial degradation. But, how far should we make moral demands of the oppressed not just to liberate themselves but also to rectify their oppressors? Such demands upon the oppressed seem supererogatory. One might also want to argue that effective resistance

28. Walker, David. 2000. "Document II: David Walker Addresses the Massachusetts General Colored Association (1828)." In *David Walker's Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, edited by Peter P. Hinks, 87. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press.

comes in different forms other than revolutionary action. If one prefers minimal moral premises, then Clarkson's defense of the negative natural right of resistance is more attractive. But if one finds it more compelling that we are not simply responsible for ourselves but also *for* others, then Cugoano's defense is more persuasive.²⁹

Second, Cugoano is a Christian paternalist in terms of defending what he deems to be moral civilization. Christian paternalism was a common view in the modern period, adopted not only by Clarkson but also more famously by John Locke,³⁰ so the problem of Christian paternalism is not unique to Cugoano as a Christian thinker. But, how do we reckon Cugoano's Christian paternalism alongside his criticism of European colonialism? His seven-year proposal demands the instruction of African ex-slaves in Christianity and the laws of civilization (*Thoughts* 99). Cugoano has the same intention in promoting the moral education of Africans through his *The Nature of Servitude*, which is directed to the Sons of Africa (*Thoughts* 145). Is Cugoano's Christian paternalism just as colonialist as Locke's and Clarkson's? Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh have claimed that Cugoano is one of the first decolonial political theorists, but more work needs to be done to substantiate this interpretation.³¹

I end with the Jamesian problem. This article brought into view radical ideas in Cugoano's philosophy. But as C. L. R. James observes in his own work on Toussaint Louverture, 'Ideas do not fall from heaven.'³² I believe James is right.³³ So the takeaway from this article is not that Cugoano is an isolated thinker deserving of canonization. Rather, the article views *Thoughts and Sentiments* as an opportunity to engage with the abolitionist political tradition and the philosophical issues raised within it. Cugoano also presents us with the possibility to reflect on the Afro-diasporic communities that he learned from, such as the Sons of Africa and the organized Black networks in London.³⁴ By reconstruct-

29. This article has avoided developing Cugoano's conception of responsibility for others since the idea deserves another article.

30. See Turner, Jack. 2011. "John Locke, Christian Mission, and Colonial America." *Modern Intellectual History* 8 (2): 267–97.

31. Mignolo, Walter D. and Catherine E. Walsh. 2018. *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

32. James, C.L.R. 1989. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 2nd ed., revised, 265. New York: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, Inc.

33. We should keep in mind what came into view through conversations between C. L. R. James and Carolyn E. Fick: the obscure, local, and unknown insurrectionary leaders of the Haitian revolution all had names, and they should come first (see Fick, Carolyn E. 2017. "C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins*, and *The Making of Haiti*." In *The Black Jacobins Reader*, edited by Charles Forsdick and Christian Høgsbjerg, 60-69. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

34. See Hanley, Ryan. 2019. "Ottobah Cugoano and the 'Black Poor', 1786–1791." In *Beyond Slavery and Abolition: Black British Writing, c. 1770–1830, 171–202*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

ing arguments from his texts, we can choose to explore issues not typically addressed in modern philosophy, such as philosophical problems arising from the African diaspora and ideas in Akan thought.³⁵ These intellectual trajectories deserve to be at the center of our reevaluation of what counts as the history of modern philosophy.³⁶

Abbreviations

Granville Sharp:

Memoirs of Granville Sharp: Memoirs of Granville Sharp, Esq.: Composed from his Own Manuscripts, and Other Authentic Documents in the Possession of his Family and of the African Institution by Prince Hoare. London: Printed for H. Colburn, 1820.

Ottobah Cugoano:

Thoughts: Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery, edited by Vincent Carretta. New York, Penguin Books, 1999.

Olaudah Equiano:

Narrative: The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings, edited by Vincent Carretta. New York, Penguin Books, 1995.

Thomas Clarkson:

Commerce: An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species. London: J. Phillips, 1786.

History of Abolition: The History of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade, 2 volumes. London: Printed by R. Taylor and Co. Shop-Lane, 1808. References are to volume number and page number.

35. I thank Kwesi Thomas for pressing me on this point that we should frame Cugoano in relation to West African philosophical traditions.

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Impolicy: An Essay on the Impolicy of the African Slave Trade: In Two Parts. London: J. Phillips, 1788.

Insurrection: The True State of the Case, Respecting the Insurrection at St. Domingo. Ipswich: Printed by J. Bush, 1792.

Summary: A Summary View of the Slave Trade and the Probable Consequences of its Abolition. London: Printed by J. Phillips, 1787.

Ultimate Emancipation: Thoughts on the Necessity of Improving the Condition of The Slaves in the British Colonies with a View to their Ultimate Emancipation. London: Printed by R. Taylor, 1823.

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