

‘THAT SOTTISH AND SELFISH PRINCIPLE’: CUGOANO ON SELF-INTEREST, IMAGINATION, AND MORAL WRONGDOING

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The following paper analyzes Ottobah Cugoano’s argument against the type of moral wrongdoing of those who participated in the practices of the transatlantic slave trade and of enslavement. I will argue that Cugoano describes moral wrongdoing in a general and particular sense. In a general sense, Cugoano depicts a form of moral wrongdoing or behavior that applies to humanity as a whole and is essentially a state of selfishness in which reason is superseded by a ‘viciated imagination’. Selfishness is equated with drunkenness or stupidity. The imagination is erroneously used to invent reasons and justifications for one’s actions outside of concern for others. Cugoano describes the particular sense of wrongdoing that follows from his general observations, especially when he analyzes the specific practices of the traders, kidnappers, and enslavers in the transatlantic slave trade. These practices represent something exemplary because they demonstrate collective and coordinated efforts of moral wrongdoing. Cugoano describes the enslavers as a self-interested group of men outside of the bounds of civil society since they are not guided by ‘any human law or divine, except the rules of their own fraternity.’ The paper will conclude by focusing on the philosophical and ethical dimensions of Cugoano’s descriptions of imagination and moral wrongdoing.

Keywords: Cugoano; history of slavery; imagination; sensibility; eighteenth century philosophy; abolition; moral philosophy

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Introduction

The undercurrent of Ottobah Cugoano's response to the transatlantic slave trade in his *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery* (1787) is an extensive reflection on individual and collective moral wrongdoing. There are two central moral questions that underpin *Thoughts and Sentiments*: (1) how can individuals commit evil but think it is just? and (2) why, given the injustice and inequities the slave trade propagates, had it not been abolished before his time? Both questions, as the present analysis demonstrates, are tied to Cugoano's accounts of the imagination and to his descriptions of the nature of moral wrongdoing—or, as he more poignantly calls it, evil. In this paper I argue that Cugoano's answer to these questions ground his moral philosophy and, consequentially, provide singular contributions to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophical debates over the nature of the mind, sensibility, and human agency.¹ Specifically, Cugoano provides insight into the *nature of the corruption of our moral sense*. According to his analysis, immoral conduct is a result of a dynamic between a state of insensibility, which arises out of the pursuit of one's own self-interest, and an impaired imagination. Ultimately, in *Thoughts and Sentiments* Cugoano simultaneously argues that slavery and its justifications are moral wrongs (evils), and that their persistence depends on a disordering of mental faculties and the collective use of deception and artifice in various sectors of the slave trade. Recent commentators have read Cugoano within the frame of the Enlightenment and with respect to central features of his ethical and political thought.² However, despite the growth of scholarship on Cugoano and the history of philosophy, innovations of his moral philosophy have not been treated in detail.³

1. The history of late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century debates over the nature of the mind, sensibility, and human agency can be seen in works of Malebranche, Hume, Shaftsbury, Edmund Burke, thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment, and others. See Koen Vermeir and Michael Deckard's (2012: 7–16) account of the history of ideas during this period and the emphasis on the study of sensation, emotions, and sensibility.

2. See, for example, Muthu (2023); Bernasconi (2022: 123–41); and Peters (2017). Also, see Hasan-Birdwell (2024).

3. Notable contributions to Cugoano scholarship include articles by Robert Bernasconi and Jeffery Hole. Bernasconi's essay "Ottobah Cugoano's Place in the History of Political Philosophy: Slavery and the Philosophical Canon" has argued for placing Cugoano within the Western tradition of ethics, demonstrating how *Sentiments* breaks with traditional images of individual responsibility in the light of widespread complicity in oppression of Africans. A radical sense of collective responsibility, Bernasconi argues, is a distinctive trait of Cugoano's thought, compared with other abolitionists and moral thinkers, and is a key component of his abolitionist project, which called for an immediate end to the slave trade and the absolute, rather than gradual, emancipation of all enslaved Africans. See Bernasconi (2022: 123–24; 135–40). Hole sheds light on Cugoano's place in the history of political philosophy, specifically the development of political liberalism. Hole argues that Cugoano's use of sentiment was not just a rhetorical strategy nor did it play a minor role in his form of argumentation, as other commentators, such as Keith Sandiford, Brycchan Carey, Amit

Cugoano's appeal to moral sentiment is not a complementary element of his political project, as other commentators have argued. Rather, as I argue, moral sentiment is a part of a larger philosophical reflection on insensibility, as it is central to moral wrongdoing. And any consideration of the notion of responsibility, I contend, must consider that those who participated in the slave trade, as Cugoano describes them, were acting not as rational agents, but as insensible actors guided by an impaired imagination and motivated by profit. The whole operation Cugoano describes in key passages in *Thoughts and Sentiments* relies on depictions of those who participated in the slave trade as being governed by self-deception and the deception of others, which complicates, in particular, Robert Bernasconi's emphasis on the definition of responsibility in Cugoano, which states 'every man, as a rational creature, is responsible for his actions.'⁴ Instead, I argue that Cugoano is defining culpability in the slave trade more centrally in terms of non-rational and insensible actors, who are not just acting in isolation but collectively and are coordinated in their wrongdoing.

Overall, the analysis will focus on Cugoano's descriptions of moral wrongdoing, which I argue result from an impaired imagination or, as Cugoano calls it, a 'viciated imagination'.⁵ Cugoano is not defining the imagination as such, but he is concerned with an impaired imagination. Although he mentions the term imagination only twice within *Thoughts and Sentiments*, his descriptions of the impaired faculty and the acts of imagining in those two passages are implicit in other passages representing the epistemological and moral error of those who participated in the slave trade. I argue that the use of a concept of imagination found in Cugoano's analysis is multifaceted, since it refers to both a mental faculty and to the activity of artifice, seduction, and most significantly, self-deception. The portrayals of an impaired imagination, particularly the distorted acts of imagining, are also accompanied by his critique of the slave traders being insensible and motivated by profit at the expense of others. And, I argue, from this perspective the whole network of the slave trade, the enslavers, traders, kidnappers, and apologists for slavery—as well as those indirectly complicit in it—are guided by fancy, artifice, and deception. Moreover, I also suggest that in showing how a distorted imagination is at the center of the discussion of enslavement and its moral implication, Cugoano advances the account of the role of imagination in the works of French-American abolitionist Anthony Benezet (1713–1784). Although commentators have connected Cugoano with Benezet and other abolitionists, this critical line within Cugoano's moral theory and its continuity with arguments present in Benezet have not been treated in depth.

Rai, and Anthony Bogue, have argued. Instead, Hole argues, Cugoano's emphasis on sentiment and on rights are two characteristic elements of his liberalism.

4. Cugoano (1999: 87).

5. Ibid. (1999: 123).

The following analysis is divided into three sections. The first section focuses on the two passages on the imagination in *Thoughts and Sentiments* to offer a general account of an impaired imagination and its role in moral wrongdoing. I will highlight the acts of imagining—which Cugoano describes as acts of artifice—as a significant source of moral error and coinciding with a state of insensibility. Here, I will also draw attention to the affinity between Benezet and Cugoano on the dynamics between the imagination and insensibility. The second section builds on the first, since it deals with Cugoano’s general assessment of the classes of individuals involved in the trade—planters, merchants, writers who justify slavery, and individuals conducting the kidnapping—and the specific practices of the slave trade and of enslavement. The third section ends the discussion on moral wrongdoing by considering ethical problems that arise in Cugoano’s analysis.

On Imaginative Invention and Insensibility in Cugoano’s Theory of Moral Wrongdoing

Imagination is not treated by Cugoano in a traditional philosophical sense because he is not concerned with defining imagination as such. Rather, Cugoano is concerned with the distortion or vitiation of imagination as the cause of moral errors. Here, it is important to distinguish the use of the term imagination, on the one hand, as it concerns the faculty of imagination, and, on the other hand, as it concerns the acts of imagining, described by Cugoano as artifice, deception (self-deception), and the invention of reasons and justifications for one’s actions, even if they are morally wrong or illegal. Cugoano describes the ‘stealing, kid-napping, enslaving, persecuting or killing’ of Africans by those who do not believe these actions to be criminal or immoral.⁶ The distortion of the faculty of imagination, as Cugoano critiques it, does not reflect an impassioned state (as is often depicted), but an insensible state, and such a distortion of the faculty is caused by and follows from the pursuit of self-interest. This section will treat insensibility and its connection to a distorted imagination, as well as Cugoano’s account of the self-interested motivations of slave traders and their associates. In section two, I connect this dynamic of insensibility, distorted imagination, and self-interest to his initial descriptions of imagination.

Sensibility, according to Cugoano, is something inherent in every human being—‘whether he be a Christian or an heathen [...] however ignorant they may be’; he describes sensibility in several passages as both a sentiment or natural feeling towards others and a moral discernment regarding the right and

6. Ibid. (1999: 34).

wrong treatment of others.⁷ And it is for this reason, Cugoano asserts, that those who are responsible for the oppression and crimes within the slave trade are men that 'must be lost to all sensibility.'⁸ The connection between insensibility, imagination, and moral wrongdoing is found in the two significant instances of the text: the first in his polemics against James Tobin, an anti-abolitionist planter in the West Indies, and the second in his criticisms of those (unnamed) who justify slavery through a belief of a natural inferiority of Africans, either based on their complexion or by theological justification depicting Africans as 'the descendants of Ham' and thereby cursed to hard labor.⁹ Cugoano calls the theological argument 'a grand pretense for the supporters of slavery.'¹⁰ We will see that both instances, either the case of Tobin or the case of others who justify enslavement, are functioning from an illusory or imaginary perspective that is also insensible to the suffering of those enslaved. This dimension of the conversation of moral wrongdoing in *Thoughts and Sentiments* holds affinity with Benezet's *A Short Account of that Part of Africa Inhabited by Negroes* (1762). For Benezet and Cugoano, as discussed below, human nature, whether defined by theological grounds or by our natural sentiment, prohibits one from engaging in acts of violence and oppression towards others. Those who participate in slavery, either in the defense of the trade or in the actual acts of enslavement, can only do so by imaginary constructions, which are not only irrational, but also deprive them of their natural affections towards humanity.

Cugoano refers to imagination in a discussion of Tobin, which I will discuss shortly, and also in a discussion of other apologists for slavery:

The learned and thinking part of men, who can refer to history, must know, that nothing with respect to colour, nor any mark or curse from any original prediction, can in anywise be more particularly ascribed to Africans than to any other people of the human species, so as to afford any pretense why they should be more evil treated, persecuted and enslaved, than any other. Nothing but ignorance, and the dreams of a viciated imagination, arising from the general countenance given to the evil

7. Ibid. (1999: 25).

8. Hole's analysis opens a space for a philosophical interpretation of sentiment against commentators who reduced this language to rhetorical tactics, such as Keith Sandiford, Brycchan Carey, Amit Rai, and Anthony Bagues. However, Hole did not take their analysis far enough to conceptualize sensibility and its role in Cugoano's moral thought in its own right. The present treatment of sentiment preserves the proper function and meaning of the word in *Thoughts and Sentiments* against commentators that attempt to either minimalize its usage or, in the case of Anthony Bagues, exclude its importance in Cugoano's thought. Bagues's argues that Cugoano emphasizes reason and religion more than sentiment and sensibility. See Bagues (2003: 32-4).

9. Cugoano (1999: 22-3; 30-34).

10. Ibid. (1999: 31).

practice of wicked men, to strengthen their hands in wickedness, could ever make any person to fancy otherwise, or to ever think that the stealing, kid-napping, enslaving, persecuting or killing a black man, is in any way and manner less criminal, than the same evil treatment of any other man of another complexion.¹¹

This brief presentation of the term imagination gives us insights not only into Cugoano's rhetorical and philosophical use of the term, but also into the ideas associated with the term, namely that imagination coincides with (a) insensibility, (b) artifice or craft, and (c) self-interests. The parallel concepts used within the two passages on imagination are essential to the nature of misconduct in the slave trade and the overarching moral question underpinning his abolitionist argument: namely *how* someone can practice or contribute to enslavement and violence against another, and deny those acts are criminal or evil. As mentioned in the introduction, there is no clear indication that someone can blindly commit injustice according to Cugoano. Nor can the question of how someone can oppress another be evaluated from the perspective of rational choice. Rather, immoral acts or commitments are based on self-delusion—which is willed and intentional—and are a result of individuals being deceived, or an individual's self-deception being strengthened by another's deception. And the operations of distorted imagination—artifice and deception—being described here rely on insensibility, where an individual treats and regards 'their fellow-creatures as with the beast of the field.'¹²

Insensibility and imagination are presented in Cugoano's first use of the term 'imagination' and are entwined with his polemics against pro-slavery apologist James Tobin:

I shall only refer [Tobin] to that description which he meant for another, as most applicable and best suited for himself; and so long as he does not renounce his craft, as well as to be somewhat ashamed of his craftsmen and their insensibility, he may thus stand as described by himself: 'A man of warm imagination (but strange infatuated unfeeling sensibility) to paint things not as they really are, but as his rooted prejudices represent them, and even to shut his eyes against the convictions afforded him by his own senses.'...but such is the sensibility of men, when their own craft of gain is advanced by the slavery and oppression of others.¹³

11. Ibid. (1999: 34).

12. Ibid. (1999: 25).

13. Ibid. (1999: 22).

Stylistically, Cugoano is using the final lines of Tobin's *Cursory Remarks upon the Reverend Mr. Ramsay's Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the Sugar Colonies* against him.¹⁴ In the original pamphlet, Tobin reproaches James Ramsay's abolitionist position, not of misleading his readers with unsound arguments, but of being himself misled by public opinion. Tobin charges that 'it happens, unfortunately for the cause of truth, that a violent and enthusiastic predilection for some favorite opinion frequently induces a man of warm imagination to paint things, not as they really are, but as his rooted prejudices represent them.'¹⁵ In this respect, Ramsay's 'favorite opinion' is that the practices of slavery in the British colonies are inhumane. According to Tobin, modern slavery, especially as practiced by British slaveholders, was milder and more lawful than previous and current practices. For Tobin, the legal and economic justifications of modern slavery are vividly discernible, to such a degree that Ramsay must have 'shut his eyes against the conviction offered to him by his own senses.'¹⁶

Cugoano replies that Tobin 'may thus stand as described by himself.'¹⁷ According to Cugoano, Tobin's 'warm imagination', or rather his ability to 'paint things not as they really are' with respect to the justification of slavery, is multifaceted. It accounts for his irrationality and the contradictions in his argumentation, and most significantly, it is an expression of, as Cugoano describes it, a 'strange infatuated unfeeling sensibility'.¹⁸ What Cugoano means when he states that Tobin has an 'unfeeling sensibility' (or more precisely is insensible) is that he lacks concern for the suffering of the enslaved but is instead concerned with justifying his own actions. Insensibility is attributed not just to Tobin, but also to all of those whose 'craft of gain is advanced by the slavery and oppression of others.'¹⁹ Sensibility, as described throughout the essay, is neither opposed to the rational mind nor purely affective, which is not distinct from how it was conceptualized in the eighteenth century.²⁰ Instead, Cugoano evokes sensibility to account for our basic ability to discern right from wrong in the treatment of others, which is a matter of the 'natural feelings' we have towards every human being in regard to their humanity.²¹ I believe this conception, however, is a departure from Edmund Burke, to whom Cugoano sent a copy of his essay,

14. Tobin (1785).

15. Ibid. (1785: 149).

16. Ibid. (1785).

17. Cugoano (1999: 123).

18. Ibid. (1999: 22).

19. Ibid. (1999).

20. See Vermeir and Deckard (2012), who suggest that conceptions of reason and sensibility in the eighteenth century can be conceived as 'one and the same movement, looked at from different angles' (vii; see also 7–10).

21. Cugoano (1999: 93; 25).

since it cannot readily fit into the category of aesthetic experience and does not involve a refinement (cultivation) of the passions.²²

Cugoano's view is closer to Benezet. In *A Short Account*, Benezet makes an adjacent point to Cugoano's argument on the interconnection between a distorted faculty of imagination and insensibility in his assessment of those who legitimize the slave trade because of the perceived inferiority of Africans.²³ He writes that it is 'a Kind of confused Imagination, or half formed Thought, in their Minds, that the Blacks are hardly of the same Species with the white Men...for I do not know how to think that any white Men could find in their Hearts, that the common Sentiments of Humanity would permit them to treat the black Men in that cruel, barbarous Manner in which they do treat them.'²⁴ Benezet's emphasis on a natural sentiment towards humanity is articulated with a religious conception of the 'image of God' in humanity as a whole, but also, similar to Cugoano, reflects on the cognitive awareness of others and the corresponding state of physical feeling. The two perspectives on sensibility are complementary: all human beings have sensibility, and any human being's sensibility is verified and reinforced by revelation. But it is important to maintain in this discussion that our sensibility, according to Cugoano, is not a matter of religious knowledge (for example, of the Ten Commandments) or forethought, because it merely requires an awareness of or response to another. It is simply, as Cugoano asserts, that those who think there is nothing wrong in the 'stealing, robbing, enslaving, and murdering of men' have lost all sensibility.²⁵ Without this awareness, in a state of insensibility, individuals are motivated by false interests that oppose their humanity. Benezet states that individuals 'substitute an imaginary Interest in the Room of that which is real and permanent.'²⁶ Cugoano's polemic against Tobin parallels Benezet's critique of pro-slavery arguments, in that Cugoano charges that Tobin (and in general those who justify enslavers) substitute a contrived

22. Cugoano sent a letter and a copy of his essay to Burke in 1787. It is not clear whether Cugoano knew of Burke outside of his role in Parliament or had read his philosophical works on sensibility from the 1750s. Burke argues in *A Vindication of Natural Society* (1756) that the natural affections between individuals are contrasted with arguments of artificial government. For Cugoano, similar to Burke, sensibility does hold social importance since it involves something crucial to our given encounter with others and in consequence necessitates our humane treatment of them.

23. Scholars commonly acknowledge Benezet's influence on Cugoano, and some have observed affinities between their work. Maurice Jackson (2009) observes that Cugoano drew on Benezet for figures of how many Africans were trafficked to and enslaved in Barbados (189). He also notes similarities between Benezet and Cugoano's rhetoric, characterization of pre-European-contact Africa, and view of the possibilities of knowledge and education to secure freedom (191–93). Jeffrey Glover (2017) observes more resemblances between Cugoano and Benezet: both argue that in the slave trade the profit motive is privileged over respect for laws of war (524), and both believe 'that biblical concepts of justice could restore legal order to African societies' (526).

24. Benezet (2024: 41–2).

25. Cugoano (1999: 25).

26. Benezet (2024: 3).

reality in the place of the objective suffering of enslaved Africans in the West Indies and elsewhere or in the place of the criminal behavior in the practice of the trade.

The polemic against Tobin is not just a play on the rhetoric of those who create false justifications for slavery, but rather a critique of whole practice of artifice and illusionary constructs. Here, it is relevant to revisit Cugoano's criticisms of Tobin's argument of degrees. Tobin's defense against the abolitionists is to draw a comparison by degrees between, for instance, West Indies slaves with the 'hardships that the poor in Great-Britain and Ireland labor under' and the 'treatment of slaves in the French Islands.'²⁷ Cugoano's response is instead to acknowledge the objective reality that 'no freeman, however poor and distressing his situation may be, would resign his liberty for that of a slave.'²⁸ A free laborer is not, as Cugoano puts it, subjected to the 'depredations committed by robbers and plunderers' as the enslaved person is.²⁹ Although enslavers in different places in the world may not be 'equally alike bad', the crime itself—in its inherent 'evil and malignancy'—remains the same: the unjust enslavement of Africans. Considered on its own, Tobin's argument of degrees reveals further insights into the procedure of a distorted imagination: namely, the abstraction of parts that are substituted for the representation of the whole. As Cugoano states, 'an equal degree of enormity found in one place, cannot justify the crimes of as great or greater enormity committed in another.'³⁰ The selective organization of claims within Tobin's argument evades accounting for the pervasive criminal acts of the trade and the culpability of those who benefited from it.

This exclusion of counterevidence is revealing to the operation of imagination as artifice. Cugoano classifies not only Tobin's argument but also the collective project of the justification of slavery itself as an act of artifice and craft. Here, in this example, artifice is described as a rhetorical technique. However, overall artifice appears to consist in inventing reasons for one's actions, when those actions (and the supporting reasons) fail to reflect the state of affairs. Such actions can include, as we will see in the following section, kidnapping and selling human beings, coercing their labor, and, as we saw with Tobin, inventing public discourse that strengthens the morality of the trade. Although acutely focused, Cugoano's engagement with Tobin points to a larger role of invention in imagination, the justifying of one's actions, which, as already discussed, is opposed not only to one's sensibility, but also to one's reason.

The second use of the word imagination in Cugoano's essay emphasizes both the distorted imagination and the ignorance of those who justify slav-

27. Cugoano (1999: 19, 20–21).

28. *Ibid.* (1999: 20).

29. *Ibid.* (1999: 21).

30. *Ibid.* (1999: 21).

ery based on the claims of the inferiority of Africans.³¹ According to Cugoano, this belief, as we saw in Benezet, depends on ‘nothing but ignorance, and the dreams of a viciated imagination, arising from the general countenance given to the evil practice of wicked men, to strengthen their hands in wickedness.’³² Ignorance does not imply a lack of knowledge in this case. The problem of slavery presented by Cugoano is not that the enslavers did not know what they were doing was wrong. Rather, our sensibility, which is innate to all human beings, would direct us (unconditionally) to our recognition of the suffering of others, and more specifically to the injustice of forced enslavement. Cugoano, I believe, is directing the reader to conceive of ignorance not as a matter of human knowledge alone, which is always liable to error: ‘but what the light of nature, and dictates of reason, when rightly considered, teach, is, no man ought to enslave another.’³³

Understanding, in this sense, requires a cultivated sense of divine knowledge (revelation), reason, and our sensibility. Cugoano observes that ‘some, who have rightly guided thereby, have made noble defenses for the universal natural rights and privileges to all men. But in this case, when the learned take neither revelation nor reason for their guide, they fall into as great, and worse errors, than the unlearned.’³⁴ The state of ignorance or of being ‘unlearned’ is worse than an error, since it is a *knowing ignorance*, a refusal to be guided by reason or revelation. This, I believe, would not just apply to enslavers, but points to a general claim about moral wrongdoing. When considering the previous passage, the state of distorted imagination and ignorance would point to an intentional or willed evil, a state that is strengthened by the justification of enslavement. With respect to the discussion of imagination, Cugoano is critiquing the pretenses of pro-slavery discourses, especially those that legitimize the treatment of Africans due to their skin color, which is based on ‘a false notion...that Africa, in general, was peopled by the descendants of Ham.’³⁵ Although Cugoano spends time refuting this biblical and historical interpretation, the key point relevant for this analysis is that knowledge does not limit moral wrongdoing; even the supposedly learned can perform and intend evil.

This criticism of moral wrongdoing is not merely meant to demonstrate that the enslavers are uncivilized as a play of rhetoric against those who deemed Africans uncivilized; rather, it reveals something more injurious, since the justification of enslavement would involve an imaginary construction, a rejection of reason, and the willful intention to perpetuate this imagined justification in

31. Ibid. (1999: 34).

32. Ibid. (1999: 34).

33. Ibid. (1999: 28).

34. Ibid. (1999: 28).

35. Ibid. (1999: 31).

the face of the realities of the slave trade. Throughout the rest of my analysis, I argue that this state Cugoano describes follows from the pursuit of self-interest. The following section attends to Cugoano's analysis of the intentional aspects of imagination, especially its self-deceptive qualities, which I argue are motivated by the principle of selfishness or self-interest. On the one hand, the intentional aspect of wrongdoing is a result of self-deception, a vitiated imagination. On the other hand, the wrongdoing is also a part of the economic relations of the trade itself, motivated by the pursuit of monetary gain.

Imagination, Self-Interest, and the Sociality of the Slave Trade

In the previous section, imagination and moral wrongdoing were spoken of in a general manner. The present section applies the general discussion within the context of the enslavers' underlying motivation of monetary pursuit, which Cugoano describes as 'that sottish and selfish principle' according to which 'they can only prosper themselves, they care nothing about the miserable situation of others.'³⁶ The selfish principle of action is distinct from and opposed to the principles of justice and equity. Cugoano departs from the basic assumption that society is founded by self-interest, an assumption held, with meaningful variations, by thinkers such as Hugo Grotius, Thomas Hobbes, and John Locke. And his critique of self-interest has affinity with Francis Hutcheson's own in *Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions* (1728).³⁷ Throughout Cugoano's descriptions of the slave trade, he is concerned with the type of network that is founded on interests alone, which, as we have seen in the prior section, is opposed to

36. Ibid. (1999: 32).

37. Francis Hutcheson (2002 [1728]: 131–32) argues that 'publick affections' are a counterbalance to selfishness: 'were we to strike a Medium of the several Passions and Affections, we should perhaps find the Medium of the publick Affections not very far from a sufficient Counter-balance to the Medium of the Selfish; and consequently the Overballance on either side in particular Characters, is not to be looked upon as the original Constitution, but as the accidental Effect of Custom, Habits, or Associations of Ideas, or other preternatural Causes: So that an universal increasing of the Strength of either, might in the whole be of little advantage. The raising universally the publick Affections, the Desires of Virtue and Honour, would make the Hero of Cervantes, pining with Hunger and Poverty, no rare Character. The universal increasing of Selfishness, unless we had more accurate Understandings to discern our nicest Interests, would fill the World with universal Rapine and War...What seems most truly wanting in our Nature, is greater Knowledge, Attention and Consideration: had we a greater Perfection this way, and were evil Habits, and foolish Associations of Ideas prevented, our Passions would appear in better order'. For Hutcheson, moral wrongdoing is fostered by an imbalanced or disordered state of passions and by a misunderstanding of our moral faculties whereby exclusively self-interest, as opposed to a balance between benevolence and self-interest, is basic to our nature. An extreme of either one indicates an imbalance and would lead to a society of desperate Don Quixotes or a world of pillaging and war. The solution, for Hutcheson, is knowledge.

reason and a human being's natural sensibility. The notion of imagination is linked to the principle of self-interest, not only in terms of Cugoano's association of the principle of self-interest with ignorance and drunkenness, but also in his descriptions of the different participants in the trade.

Cugoano describes three categories of individuals within the network of the trade. The first is the writers, the pamphleteers, who use seductive rhetoric and argumentation to justify slavery. Cugoano's polemics against Tobin may be extended more generally to these writers as a category. The second is the various classes of individuals who seek to gain from the trafficking of Africans, which include the kidnappers, the traders, those who ran slave forts that organized the bureaucratic end of the trade, and the perpetual enslavers who made a continuous profit from the enslavement of Africans. The third consists of those who do not directly participate but do not actively work to stop the trade. Cugoano, in this respect, casts a large net of responsibility for the trade: even those who are not directly dealing in it are still responsible for its continuation.³⁸ Examples of indirect participants whom I will reference are the legislators and those in authority who do not stop the trade. Moreover, I contend that these three classes play different roles contributing to the continuity of the trade but share the practices of craft and deception to justify their interests.

The class of authors are the inventors of the 'grand pretensions' that are 'made use of by the favourers of slavery, to encourage and embolden' the traffickers.³⁹ In addition to Tobin, Cugoano would have also been referencing individuals of the British (and Scottish) planter class who were active in legislation and public speeches and who produced writings that advocated for slavery.⁴⁰ One striking example is Cugoano's former enslaver and Scottish slave owner Alexander Campbell, Esq., a plantation owner in the Ceded Islands.⁴¹ Campbell—who like many planters was able to acquire large amounts of land, and accordingly slaves, after the Treaty of Paris—was an influential lobbyist from

38. See Bernasconi (2022: 135–40) for a discussion of Cugoano's notion of responsibility.

39. Cugoano (1999: 45).

40. For a historical overview of the British and Scottish planter class, see Ragatz (1928: 3–36); Drescher (1977: 15–37); Pitman (1917: 61–91). For background on the Scottish planter class, see Karras (1992: 9–45).

41. Alston (2021). Alexander Campbell left Grenada for London in 1772, taking Cugoano with him, to lobby on behalf of his class of West Indian enslavers. He successfully argued in court against a new tax on sugar imports (65). Since the trip was taken after *Somerset*, Cugoano could not have been compelled to return to Grenada when Campbell went back in 1778; Alston observes that Cugoano may have been in Campbell's service until then. In 1790 Campbell spoke before Parliament on the 'good conduct' of slave overseers and managers in Grenada, leaving out, Alston notes, the brutal treatment enslaved people faced there (65). Five years later, during the Fédon Rebellion against the British colonial and planter class, Campbell was executed by insurgents (80). See also Quintanilla (2003). For an overview of the development of agriculture in the Ceded Islands see Ragatz (1928: 111–41).

the 1770s to the 1790s.⁴² Moreover, the Treaty of Paris also caused an increase of sugar plantations in the second half of the eighteenth century, which brought both an extensive amount of revenue into the British economy and also an increase of anti-abolitionist printed pamphlets that utilized the present political rhetoric and varied arguments for the justification of slavery.⁴³ For this reason, Cugoano could also have been referencing anti-abolitionist pamphleteers who sought to steer public opinion during times of intense legal debates about the slave trade.⁴⁴ The planters and pamphleteers were not different classes of individuals. These writers were referred to by Cugoano as 'artificers'; they used historical, legal, or theological arguments that not only sanctioned modern slavery practices but also conceived of them as conducive to the economic and moral progress of society. The hallmark connection Cugoano makes is that this rhetoric did not just militate against the abolitionists but emboldened plantation owners to continue their acts of enslavement. Part of the wrongdoing of slavery is the formulation and dissemination of the pretensions themselves: namely, that they inspire wrongdoing in others and that they are false in themselves, idolatrous, and don't have any 'foundation or shadow of truth to support them.'⁴⁵ But another part of the wrongdoing that Cugoano emphasizes is the mental state or disposition of the artificer or crafter who justifies, to himself and others, the 'traffic of buying, selling and enslaving men.'⁴⁶

According to Cugoano, the pamphleteers who justify slavery—especially those who use scripture to do so—distort the faculty of reason for their own ends: 'the pretenses that some men make use of holding slaves, must be evidently the grossest perversion of reason, as well an inconsistent and diabolical use of the sacred writings.'⁴⁷ The moral error of a mental act of interpretation or misinterpretation of a sacred text is not limited to the dubious argument that is made, as in these cases of conceiving of Mosaic law and the curse of Ham as justifying the enslavement of Africans. Such justifications also try to establish, as Cugoano states, 'a precedent and rule for men to commit wickedness.'⁴⁸ The authors of these arguments create grounds for others to make use of the arguments and adhere to the lines of misinterpretation, for the benefit of their own interests in the slave trade, therefore further practicing injustice 'with their

42. Alston (2021: 64–6). For an overview of the French Wars (2021) and the Treaty of Paris, see Ragatz (1928: 204–38).

43. See discussion of the anti-abolitionist debates in Britain and the production of pamphlets supporting slavery in the West Indies and the slave trade in general in Dumas (2016: 55–69).

44. *Ibid.* (2016).

45. Cugoano (1999).

46. *Ibid.* (1999: 18).

47. *Ibid.* (1999: 29).

48. *Ibid.* (1999).

fellow man.⁴⁹ Moreover, Cugoano states, with Hume in mind, the same form of criticism holds against anti-abolitionist attitudes towards Africans as inordinately unsociable and ignorant, so that slavery brings them into a better condition than if they would remain in their homeland.⁵⁰ This 'specious pretense', like some of the contentions of Tobin we have seen, would not, even if true, justify the enslavement of Africans, let alone justify keeping them in perpetual slavery, because it was not the intentions of slaveholders to better Africans but to benefit from their perpetual enslavement. As seen in the reference to Benezet, the type of argument that justifies slavery upon the dehumanization of Africans is the work of both imagination and insensibility. According to Cugoano, given that such claims are 'without any shadow of justice and truth',⁵¹ they are almost more dangerous than, say, an argument about the profitability of slavery; they perpetuate a misconception of the purpose and intention of slavery that can never be fulfilled since it does not accord with the reality of how Africans are, nor the violent realities of slavery that they endure.

A second class of moral wrongdoing is that of the trafficker or kidnapper, in their means of deception to obtain African bodies: what Cugoano describes as the 'insidious method to procure slaves.'⁵² The methods and uses of enslavement involved varied practices that contributed to the overall network of slave trading in Cugoano's time, including, for instance, the African kidnappers (slave procurers) who had the ability to travel within the interiors of the country where Europeans could not go. The slave procurers are described by Cugoano as the 'greatest villains as any in the world', who use means of trickery of movement and travel to evade being identified. It is important to note that the kidnappers, according to Cugoano, are not acting of their own agency entirely, but are likewise 'corrupted and even viciated by their intercourse of Europeans.'⁵³ The European merchant's artifice involves 'inventions of merchandize' and coercion of people into the slave trade by means of deception. Cugoano observes the practices of slave traders in forts and factories who use servants as 'decoy ducks to deceive others' and to lure them into enslavement. He details these means of deception in detail, including the practices of offering gifts, trinkets, and false promises. Cugoano observes that these tactics are 'something after the same manner that East-India soldiers are procured in Britain; and the inhabitants here, just as much sell themselves, and one another as they do; and the kidnappers here, and the slave-procurers in Africa, are much alike.'⁵⁴

49. Ibid. (1999).

50. Ibid. (1999: 22).

51. Ibid. (1999: 23).

52. Ibid. (1999: 27).

53. Ibid. (1999).

54. Ibid. (1999: 26).

Cugoano's reproach of the 'artificers' of slavery is not a mere ad hominem argument against pro-slavery advocates or slave merchants or even the planter class, since he emphasizes (a) their disregard for the harm of others because of their interests; (b) their rejection of any human, natural, or divine law; and (c) their insensibility to the suffering of others. We have already defined these moral and cognitive characteristics under the use and expression of imagination, but all of these are interconnected and dependent since the insensibility of men is defined by their disregard of the oppression of others for their own advancement, which is a rejection of 'the principles of justice and equity' and any sense of 'duty in religion and humanity.'⁵⁵ These characteristics can essentially be described as selfishness or self-interestedness. Cugoano describes this state of self-interestedness as following a 'sottish and selfish principle.' Selfishness is equated with drunkenness, stupidity, and a persistent ignorance that enables individuals to exist 'without concern and discernment among men', insofar as they can prosper and not take responsibility for the effects of their pursuits.⁵⁶ For Cugoano, this selfishness reflects a disordered or what he calls a 'viciated' imagination, which allows people to invent reasons to justify their misconduct, persuade others through deception, and misrepresent reality.

Those implicated in but not directly participating in the slave trade are also described as being under the guises of false argumentation and share the same deception.⁵⁷ Cugoano specifies a class of legislators as the 'partizans', including those who remained silent on the trade or compromised their own convictions that slavery was wrong.⁵⁸ This class of individuals, also operating from 'viciated principles', is large; by bad governance, they have 'led the whole nation into debt, error and disgrace.'⁵⁹ A subclass of these partisans directly profited from the trade, but others profited from speculation, investments, or 'illegal gain'.⁶⁰ Cugoano describes these men as being like 'adventurers in the lottery, each grasping for the highest prize.'⁶¹ But like the slave traders and planters, they use 'avarice and covetousness' to seek riches at the expense of others.

The danger of this class of men is that, like the Spaniards seeking the 'Peruvian vessels of gold', they are driven to 'commit terrible cruelties, and their hearts become hardened in wickedness; so that even their enormous crimes sink in their own estimation, and soften into trivial matters.'⁶² And this art of conversion, making illegal and exceptional violence (in pursuit of interests) into

55. *Ibid.* (1999: 27).

56. *Ibid.* (1999: 49).

57. *Ibid.* (1999).

58. *Ibid.* (1999: 71).

59. *Ibid.* (1999).

60. *Ibid.* (1999).

61. *Ibid.* (1999).

62. *Ibid.* (1999).

the norm or the status quo, describes for Cugoano the system of legislation governing the British colonies. It also describes the moral state of those who gain from slavery and the colonists themselves. For ‘the laws as reaching from Great-Britain to the West-Indies, do not detect them, but protect the opulent slave holders.’⁶³ For example, the Royal African Company, established in the 1660s, was a significant government institution for the trade because it established coastal forts and factories that allowed merchants easier access to the traffic in Africans, becoming the largest contributor to the traffic of enslaved people to the Americas.⁶⁴ It evolved into the African Company of Merchants, established by the African Company Act of 1750, which was more closely regulated, with forts funded by the British Parliament and secured against other nations by the British military.

In the passages above, Cugoano is indeed appealing to the values of the British empire, its expansive, ever-increasing power and system of rights, as Jeffrey Hole has argued.⁶⁵ And Cugoano’s indictment of the British legislature and those who do not contribute directly to the slave trade reflects his argument of the total moral responsibility of everyone connected to the slave trade, as Robert Bernasconi emphasizes.⁶⁶ However, Cugoano, presenting the reader with more than an analysis of the politics of the state or an appeal to conscience, is offering insights into the nature of wrongdoing in the slave trade. Slavery and its justifications are moral wrongs, evils, but their persistence depends on a disordering of the individual mind’s faculties and the collective use of deception and artifice at various levels of British society and economy.

The Role of Human Agency in Moral Wrongdoing

I believe the ethical problem that we are presented with in this discussion of imitation and imagination is the role of human agency in Cugoano. This problem complicates an interpretation of Cugoano that rests largely on his conception of responsibility. The nature of responsibility is called into question by Cugoano’s own suggestions that those involved in the trade do so because of their own ambition, avarice, self-interest, and passivity towards influences such as self-deception and deception by others. The deceptive element exacerbates the process of enslavement: convincing people to resort to kidnapping on false claims

63. Ibid. (1999).

64. See Cugoano’s full descriptions of the slave trafficking network established by the Royal African Company *ibid.* (2016: 73).

65. Hole (2017: 179).

66. See Bernasconi (2022: 135–40) for a discussion of Cugoano’s notion of responsibility.

of gain or offering gifts, trinkets, and other false promises. Moral wrongdoing, or evil as Cugoano describes it, would be a mixture between agency and subjection: the agent believes they are acting in accordance with their own self-interest, but they are acting against it, under another's influence. And because, as mentioned throughout the analysis, the distorted imagination is an indication of an insensible, as well as irrational, disposition, there is no recourse to an individual's own faculties to reproach oneself. Cugoano accounts for the paradox of agency in moral wrongdoing in his metaphor of the 'goddess of avarice':

as well then might we not expect tenderness and compassion from those whom the goddess of avarice has so allured with her charms, that her heart-sick lovers are become reversed to the feelings of human woe; and with great hurry and bustle of the russet slaves employed in all drudgeries of the western isles, and maritime shores in the cruel and involuntary service of her voluptuousness, having so dazzled their eyes, and bereaved them of all sensibility, that their hearts are become callous as the nether millstone, fierce as the tygers, and devoid of the natural feelings of men? From all such enchantments we would turn away, and fly from those ravenous beasts of prey, as from the weeping crocodiles and the devouring reptiles, and as from the hoary monsters of the deep.⁶⁷

The imagery of the passage, as Vincent Carretta notes, comes from the Book of Revelation, but Cugoano's general account of moral wrongdoing, the seductive nature of it, is still present here.⁶⁸ The first act of seduction resulting in enslavement to greed, leading in turn to the loss of humanity, is the path of descent into evil. The power of greed over the will is not just symptomatic of the slave trade, but a constant concern of the philosophical tradition since Plato and Aristotle. The context of the slave trade iterates the problem of greed in a slightly different manner because it is not a question of greed itself, but the cruelty that accompanies its pursuit.

The loss of sensibility, the innate discernment that prohibits an individual from acting cruelly against another, is important to Cugoano's diagnosis on the moral problem of greed. In this sense, greed produces inequities. Benezet's addition to Cugoano's diagnosis is to argue that the perceived gains from profiting from the trade are but imaginary, the work of our imagination, for they 'raise in their Minds an imagined Apprehension of their being Persons more happy, and of greater Importance than other People, who do live in the like Affluence and

67. *Ibid.* (2022: 93).

68. See Carretta's note 158 (1999: 172).

State; yet happy would it be if they were sensible how great is their Mistake.⁶⁹ In the closing remarks of *A Short Account*, Benezet encourages those with these false imaginings of their own wellbeing to read and apply the 'Parable of the rich Man and poor', where callous wealth and power does not exalt a person but ultimately damns them.⁷⁰ The pursuit of wealth is a false but vivacious image of one's own wellbeing and offers a strong incentive to imitate others. However, for Cugoano, the pursuit of wealth and industry can be turned away from the desire for self-interest or greed and can be an equitable pursuit to bring in 'more revenue in a righteous way.'⁷¹ Specifically, Cugoano envisions ending the slave trade, creating alliances between nations through philanthropy, promoting the arts and sciences, and invigorating trade through resources extracted by justly compensated labor.⁷² The issue arises when the pursuit of wealth is self-interested, concerning one's own wellbeing at the expense of others' wellbeing. Once that self-interested principle of action takes effect, it is unclear if the actor can be considered rational or free in committing evil.

Conclusion

The present paper analyzed some major aspects of Cugoano's moral theory in *Thoughts and Sentiments*. There is more work to be done to account for the multiplicity of argumentation in this text and its role in the history of moral philosophy. For this reason, bringing Cugoano into dialogue with the works of Benezet was essential to expanding the work on Cugoano's within the context of the philosophical tradition. Cugoano concurred with Benezet that an imagined state was a departure from the state of affairs, and also from one's own human sentiment and the dictates of scripture. It does not merely reflect a state of ignorance but an unfeeling state towards a sector of humanity. The outcome, I believe, for both writers is a fundamental assessment of enslavers: not only that they are immoral and irrational, but that they create an imaginary world in which they conceive that their wellbeing can only be achieved by the oppression of others. This is not just a moral error but also an epistemic one. This was the heart of the analysis in section one, where I argued that the concept of imagination found in Cugoano's analysis refers both to a mental faculty and to the activity of artifice, seduction, and most significantly self-deception. It is first and foremost an inventive faculty and action that often substitutes the imagined or constructed for the real in a skillful and calculated manner. And from this we can understand how

69. Benezet (2024: 81).

70. Ibid. (2024: 81).

71. Cugoano (1999: 101).

72. Ibid. (1999: 101).

imagination accounts for two central moral questions in Cugoano's *Thoughts and Sentiments*, as set forth in the introduction: (1) how can individuals commit evil but think it is just? and (2) why, given the injustice and inequities the slave trade propagates, had it not already been abolished? The analysis of imagination not only describes the mechanics that answer the first question—how individuals are able to turn themselves away from their innate sentiments towards injustice—but also the explanation of the second, in the convergence between the faculty of imagination and imitation in the pursuit of self-interest. The individual and collective moral failure of the slave trade was a matter of both the pursuit of profit and also, as we saw, of a dynamism of deception and self-deception. This portion of the analysis I argued draws on Cugoano's significant contribution within the history of ethical thought, specifically on the validity of discussions that only concern the agency of the moral actor. Cugoano's diagnosis and ultimate conclusion is that, despite the commonplace ideas of agency in the pursuit of self-interest, one can be deceived even of the correctness of this seemingly basic motive. The agent can believe that they are acting in accordance with their own interest, but they are actually acting against it. The outcome of the distorted imagination, which is the danger of moral wrongdoing, is an insensible as well as irrational disposition, leaving an individual without recourse to their own faculties of self-reproach.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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