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WILLIAM WILBERFORCE ON THE IDEA OF NEGRO INFERIORITY

By William Baker

From their first explorations on the coast of West Africa in the sixteenth century, Englishmen were impressed with their own superiority over black Africans. The Negro's darkness of skin was associated, in the English mind, with darkness of mind and soul. Strange costumes and customs were attributed to a lack of civilization; and African religion was seen simply to be "heathen," that is, not Christian. By the seventeenth century some English writers were recalling the ancient fable of Noah's curse on Ham as an explanation of the Negroes' color and lower station in the scale of living creatures. A rationale —the supposed inferiority of the Negro—was readily available for the development of the vast system of Negro slavery.[1] Domination and outright exploitation would have been unacceptable without the assumption that the black man was more akin to the brutish animal than to the human being, an assumption which gave the white master every moral and legal right to own and use his slaves as he owned and used his animals.

William Wilberforce (1759–1833), the English parliamentary spokesman for the abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire, saw clearly the importance of the belief in Negro inferiority. "The advocates for the Slave Trade originally took very high ground; contending that the Negroes were an inferior race of beings," Wilberforce wrote in a pamphlet in 1807. "It is obvious," he continued, "that, if this were acknowledged, they [the Negroes] might be supposed, no less than their fellow brutes, to have been comprised within the original grant of all inferior creatures to the use and service of man." If the blacks were incorrigibly stupid and morally depraved to the level of mere beasts, "then all, except perhaps a few stubborn advocates for justice in the abstract, would be content to leave them to their fate."[2]

In the course of his labors to abolish the slave trade, Wilberforce exposed the sham logic in the idea of Negro inferiority. Arguing as a politician for specific laws of abolition rather than as an intellectual seeking to make an abstract point, he instinctively believed the transplanted African to be fully human and a victim of abusive circumstances. But as he listened to the advocates of slavery defending their position, he saw that their prejudices concerning the intrinsic nature of the Negro served as the moral and intellectual bulwark of their system. When he gathered evidence, debated in Parliament,

[1]The best treatment of the origins of this racial, religious, and social-psychological prejudice toward Africans is to be found in Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Chapel Hill, 1958), 3–43.

[2]William Wilberforce, *A Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade; addressed to the Freeholders and other Inhabitants of Yorkshire* (London, 1807), 54–56. Wilberforce was by no means the first person to refute the idea of Negro inferiority: see William O. Blake, *History of Slavery* (Columbus, Ohio, 1858), 159–70.

addressed his constituency, and wrote pamphlets in favor of abolition, he asserted the full humanity of the Negro as the basis of his action.

If Wilberforce's arguments against the old view of Negro inferiority now appear to be obvious, it is because he and his fellow English abolitionists (along with their American counterparts) did their job well. Although his conclusions are now assumed, Wilberforce's method of treating the problem is still interesting as well as enlightening.

Early in his campaign against the slave trade, he saw that the idea of Negro inferiority was directly related to the situation in the West Indies. The condition of the slaves in the islands provided a case in point for those Englishmen who were predisposed to regard the Negro as inferior. One English visitor to Jamaica observed that the common opinion of the plantation owners was that the Negroes were "an inferior species," and admitted that the facts of plantation life apparently substantiated that opinion: the illiterate slaves were "addicted to stealing," practiced "low cunning and contempt of truth," and were possessed with "the greatest aversion to every species of labour."[3] The blacks were, in other words, lazy thieves and liars. Another observer gave a similar report: the West Indian slaves were "generally sad thieves" who appeared to have no sense of honesty. "Ignorant of all moral principle, they steal without thinking it wrong, and without any apprehension, except that of being detected." There was "nothing of diligence, or industry" among them; and they "seemed almost too idle to raise the hammer, which they let fall by its own weight, repeating the blow several times, upon the same stone, until it was broken to pieces."[4]

An historian of Jamaica, writing in the late eighteenth century, even argued that the black man was little elevated above the orangutan, and that an orangutan husband would be no dishonor to a Hottentot female. This low estimate of the Negro was the basis of much of the old unrevised colonial judiciary system. A statute in Barbados, dating from 1688 and still operative in the early years of the nineteenth century, prescribed the principles of trial for Negro criminals: "they being brutish slaves, deserve not, for the baseness of their condition, to be tried by the legal trial of twelve men of their peers." The normal laws and customs of the islands had no bearing on those "barbarous, wild, and savage" creatures.[5]

If the Negro by law as well as by public opinion was assumed to be brutishly inferior, then he could be treated as an animal. Some British slave traders turned the argument full circle and felt not only justified, but even self-righteous, in capturing Africans, loading them like animals into ships, and transporting them to the West Indies. The blacks, regarded as too deficient and incompetent to be fit for anything but hewing wood and drawing water for white masters, were being done a favor by being put into their

[3]Thomas Cooper, *Facts Illustrative of the Condition of the Negro Slaves in Jamaica* (London, 1824), 12–15.

[4]George Pinckard, *Notes on the West Indies* (London, 1816), I, 302, 123.

[5]William Wilberforce, *An Appeal to the Religion, Justice, and Humanity of the Inhabitants of the British Empire, in Behalf of the Negro Slaves in the West Indies* (London, 1823), 10–11.

God-ordained "station in life." In the West Indies they would be fed, clothed, sheltered, and put to the tasks for which they were best equipped. Thus some slave traders insisted that they were performing an act of mercy by transporting Africans "to the enjoyments of West Indian servitude."[6]

The logic of that malicious rationalization was obviously built on the premise of Negro inferiority. The passage from Africa and servitude in the West Indies were hardly enjoyable for any human being. First, the Africans were stripped of all dignity: captured, sold, shackled in irons, and crammed into the darkened holds of moldy wooden vessels, they inevitably suffered hunger, thirst, depression, sexual abuse, crippling diseases, and often death. According to statistics gathered by Wilberforce, an average of 12½% of the slaves perished during the passage from Africa to the West Indies, 4½% died in West Indian ports before they were sold, and another 33% expired within the first year of captivity. Faced with the data revealing such inhumanity, Wilberforce could not resist concluding that "if a trade in men is established, if her men are all converted into goods, and become commodities that can be bartered, it follows, they must be subject to ravage just as goods are."[7]

And so they were. Once in the islands, they were subjected to the "driving system" and forced to work by "the immediate impulse or sudden terror of the whip."[8] Public flogging, a common occurrence, convinced Wilberforce that "unless the feeling of sympathy towards Blacks, as fellow-creatures, or of decency respecting them as of our own species, were not, to so great a degree, extinct, such exhibitions would not be continued."[9] Nor did colonial laws offer any bodily protection. A statute in Barbados read that "if any Negro or other slave under punishment by his master or his order, for running away, or any other crimes or misdemeanors towards his said master, unfortunately shall suffer in life or member, which seldom happens, no persons whatever shall be liable to any fine."[10]

As the abolitionist party in England began to reveal the harsh treatment being given the slaves in the Empire, the plantation owners countered with the argument that their handling of the Negro was "sufficiently mild and humane" and that they were giving "due attention" to the slave's needs, desires, and feelings. Wilberforce's reply hit at the heart of the myth of Negro inferiority: the white slave-owners' "estimate of *sufficiency* was drawn from their calculations of what was *due* to the wants and feelings, the pleasures and pain of a being little above the brute creation; not, of a Being of talents and

[6]William Wilberforce, *A Letter to His Excellency the Prince of Talleyrand Perigord, on the Subject of the Slave Trade* (London, 1814), 365. For Wilberforce's attack on the supposed "enjoyment of West Indian servitude," see his pamphlet entitled "The Slave-Trade; and the Elevation of the Colored Race," published by an anonymous American abolitionist in a volume entitled *The Enormity of the Slave-Trade and the Duty of Seeking the Moral and Spiritual Elevation of the Colored Race* (New York, n. d.), 5–19.

[7]William Cobbett, *The Parliamentary History of England* (London, 1816), XXVIII, 45–48, 43.

[8]Wilberforce, *An Appeal in Behalf of the Negro Slaves,* 12.

[9]Wilberforce, *A Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, 144.

[10]Wilberforce, *An Appeal in Behalf of the Negro Slaves,* 41.

passions, of anticipations and recollections, of social and domestic feelings similar to our own."[11] The slaves were admittedly being fed, clothed, and medically treated. After all, colonial self-interest necessitated the healthiness and strength of the Negroes. But did not a human being need more than food, shelter, and clothing?

What! are these the only claims of a rational being? Are the feelings of the heart nothing? Where are social intercourse and family endearment? where the consciousness of independence, the prospect often realized of affluence and honour? where are willing service and grateful returns? where, above all, the light of religious truth, and the hope full of immortality? So far from thanking the honourable gentleman for the feeding, clothing, and lodging, of which he boasts, I protest against the way in which he has mentioned them, as degrading men to the level of the brutes, and insulting all the higher qualities of our common nature.[12]

Here was the rub: there was an implicit rejection, on the part of the plantation owner, of any "common nature" between blacks and whites. From early childhood the colonialists were accustomed to seeing an order of beings around them whom they were taught to consider as inferior.[13] Most of the Negroes in the West Indies undeniably lacked mental alertness, motivation, and the standards of white morality. Enslavement had so degraded them that they appeared to be more like brutes than human beings. "In truth," Wilberforce insisted in 1807, "to have formed any conclusions against the Negroes from the experience we had of them in their state of bondage, was not less unphilosophical than unjust."[14] The idea of inferiority could be dispelled only if some research were done on the African in his native habitat, before he was brutalized by the slave trade. "It was the condition of the West Indian slaves which first drew my attention," Wilberforce wrote in his old age, "and it was in the course of my inquiry that I was led to Africa and the abolition."[15]

Thomas Clarkson, himself one of the early leaders of the English abolitionist movement, first met Wilberforce in 1787. "I found the subjects of slavery and the slave-trade deeply impressed on his heart," Clarkson later wrote, "but of the *slave-trade* especially, he *had very little knowledge in detail.* He had already learned. . . much concerning the treatment of the slaves in the West Indies, but he knew very little *of the African department of the subject.*"[16] Shortly after the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade was founded in 1787, Wilberforce wrote "requesting information as speedily as possible relative to the Slave Trade."[17] Clarkson, who boarded slave ships in all the

[11]Wilberforce, *A Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade,* 62–63.

[12]Robert Isaac Wilberforce and Samuel Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce* (London, 1838), II, 140. "To all the effects of bodily distinctions are superadded all those arising from the want of civilization and knowledge" (p. 9). "On what other principle than that of the inferiority of the species, can it be explained, that, in estimating what is due to the Negroes, all consideration of their moral nature has been altogether left out?" (33).

[13]Hansard, *Parliamentary Debates,* 1st series, VIII, 993.

[14]Wilberforce, *An Appeal in Behalf of the Negro Slaves*, 47.

[15]*The Life of William Wilberforce*, II, 149.

[16]Thomas Clarkson, *Strictures on a Life of William Wilberforce* (London, 1838), 46.

[17]*Ibid.*, 129.

major English ports and took copious notes on the crowded conditions and barbaric treatment of the slaves, was one of Wilberforce's principal sources of information.

Wilberforce also frequently entertained knowledgeable people in his home and afterwards noted in his diary that he had "discussed Slave Trade."[18] By September 1790, he had collected 1400 folio pages of evidence to present to the House of Commons; and in October 1790, a friend visiting in the home noted that Wilberforce and his assistant, Thomas Babington, "have never appeared down-stairs since we came, except to take a hasty dinner, and for half an hour after we have supped: the Slave Trade now occupies them nine hours daily."[19]

Wilberforce weighed his evidence carefully. Much of his information, obtained from people such as merchants, agents, officers, and seamen who had vested interests in the slave trade, had to be sifted with a critical eye.[20] He interviewed scientists who had visited Africa out of "liberal curiosity," clergymen who ministered to the blacks in the West Indies, and naval and military officers who had no need to defend or condemn the slave trade.[21] The need, as he saw it, was for specific evidence rather than for general platitudes for or against abolition. He once gave a friend a gentlemanly tongue-lashing for answering some questions "in a loose, general way, which though it might do well enough for *talk,* is not precise enough for my purpose."[22]

Soon after he began collecting evidence on the brutalities of the slave trade, Wilberforce saw the need to probe deeper. The issue of Negro inferiority drove him to inquire into the nature of Africa and the Africans before the disruption of the slavers. He consulted old books, such as Golberry's *Travels,* Welsh's *Voyages to Benin,* Beaver's *African Memoranda,* and Moore's *Travels*, all written before the slave trade had become a hotly-debated issue.[23] On August 23, 1793, he wrote to Zachery Macaulay, who was soon to become the governor of Sierra Leone, requesting information on Africa. With most English politicians still accepting the propaganda that the slave trade was essentially humane and beneficial to the African, Wilberforce wanted to bring "such 'damning proof' to the contrary that no honest man could resist the force of it.' Most of all, he wanted data to refute "the assertions of our opponents that the Africans are an inferior species; that they are incapable of civilization, either from intellectual or moral defects."[24] Again from Thomas Clarkson, he received numerous specimens of handiwork from West Africa to prove that the natives were capable of creative, artistic productivity.[25] Pages of descriptive testimony on the Africans were gleaned from interviews with a Mr. Nisbett, a surgeon who had worked in Africa; from a Mr.

[18]*The Life of William Wilberforce*, I, 222.

[19]*Ibid.*, 281–82.

[20]Cobbett, *Parliamentary History*, XXVIII, 44.

[21]Wilberforce, *A Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, 11–14.

[22]*The Life of William Wilberforce*, III, 199.

[23]*Ibid.*, II, 99; Wilberforce, *Letter to Talleyrand*, 394–95.

[24]*The Life of William Wilberforce*, II, 409–410.

[25]E. C. P. Lascelles, *Granville Sharp and the Freedom of Slaves in England* (London, 1928), 66.

Weuves, an African merchant; and from Governor Miles, of Cape Coast Castle.[26]

In 1804, when Wilberforce wrote to a friend listing eight topics on which he needed more evidence for presentation before the House of Commons, the very first topic was entitled "The African Negroes, not inferior to the natives of other countries, under similar circumstances, in intellectual or moral qualities."[27] Numerous pamphlets were then being written against the treatment of slaves, both on the slave ships and on West Indian plantations. Fearing that those pieces of lightly-veiled abolitionist propaganda would either repel the prejudiced reader or "make Africa a secondary object,"[28] Wilberforce insisted on holding to the fundamental issue: Was the Negro, as observed in his native land, so barbarian and unintelligent that he should be treated as an animal?

Wilberforce's answer was unequivocal. Against the charge that the Africans were mentally inferior, he displayed examples of their handiwork and gave the testimony of two men who engaged in the slave trade but nevertheless admitted that one-fourth to one-fifth of the Negroes on their slave ships could read and write. Answering the accusation that the Negroes were morally depraved, he summarized the statements of numerous observers of African villages who saw the natives to be "industrious, generous, eminent for truth, seldom chargeable with licentiousness, distinguished for their domestic affections, and capable at all times of heroic magnanimity."[29]

Nor were the Negroes, as observed in their homeland, cruel and barbarous as the advocates of slavery were contending. Africans did not fight wars for ideological or blood-thirsty reasons. They fought only as a result of the greedy or sensual leadership of their tribal chiefs. The slave traders, in fact, had stimulated this greed and thereby caused tribal wars by offering brandy, trinkets, or some other commodity to native leaders in order to entice them to raid and destroy villages, and to bring prisoners to the white men.[30] Before the ravages of the slave trade, according to Wilberforce, the Africans were "in general good men, naturally gentle and benevolent," and were "more polite and civilized than most people in the world, not excepting the European."[31]

Africa was not the only source of evidence for exposing the falsity of the idea of Negro brutishness. Replying to the slave owners' anxiety that the latent barbarism of the Negro would only lead to plunder and destruction if the slaves were freed, Wilberforce cited the example of those Africans who fought beside English troops in 1815 and were then released as free men in Trinidad. By 1822 they were still "earning their subsistence, with so much industry and good conduct, as to have put to silence all the calumnies that were at first urged against the measure."[32]

Wilberforce scored his most shrewd point against the idea of Negro inferiority when he cited an article in the *Quarterly Review*, January 7, 1816.

[26]Clarkson, *Strictures on a Life of William Wilberforce*, 54.

[27]*The Life of William Wilberforce*, III, 203. [28]*Ibid.*, 197–98.

[29]*An Appeal in Behalf of the Negro Slaves*, 24.

[30]Cobbett, *Parliamentary History*, XXVIII, 43.

[31]Wilberforce, *Letter to Talleyrand*, 394–95.

[32]Anonymous, *Substance of the Proceedings in the House of Commons on Thursday, July 25, 1822* (London, 1822), 3.

The author of the article, M. Dupuis, was the British consul at Magadore. He told of an incident of some white Europeans having been captured and subjected to prolonged harsh treatment by a tribe of Arabs. The captives, Dupuis observed, appeared "lost to reason and feeling; their spirits broken, and their faculties sunk in a species of stupor." Alas, even the white man, enslaved and maltreated, became brutish. "The succession of hardships, without any protecting law to which they can appeal for any alleviation or redress, seems to destroy every spring of exertion or hope in their minds. They appear indifferent to every thing around them; abject, servile, and brutish."[33] The analogy was obvious: the Arabs, given the precedent of British colonial justifications of Negro slavery, could have pointed condescendingly to the inferiority of enslaved white Europeans, and could have held the fabricated myth of inferiority as a vindication of their actions.

In 1789, eighteen years before the cessation of the slave trade and almost half a century before the abolition of slavery in the British Empire, Wilberforce urged the House of Commons to consider the real meaning of the fable of Negro inferiority. "It is we ourselves that have degraded them to that wretched brutishness and barbarity which we now plead as the justification of our guilt." Not the Almighty in his act of creation, but the white man in his deeds of exploitation had limited the growth of the Africans' minds, "blackened their character, and sunk them so low in the scale of animal beings that some think the apes are of a higher class, and fancy the ourang-outang has given them the go-by." Wilberforce concluded on a moral note: "What a mortification must we feel at having so long neglected to think of our guilt, or to attempt any reparation."[34]

But moral considerations were far from the minds of the advocates of slavery and the slave trade. Slavery, according to the West Indian plantation owners, was an economic necessity. One apologist for the slave trade argued, "The impossibility of doing without slaves in the West Indies will always prevent this traffic being stopped. The necessity, the absolute necessity then, of carrying it on must, since there is no other, be its excuse."[35] Politicians felt that they could not afford to turn a deaf ear to their colonialists in the West Indies, who were the source of four-fifths of the overseas income tax. Nor could Parliament ignore the fact that Britain's prosperous shipping industry owed much to the "slavers"; slave ships from Liverpool alone, between 1783 and 1793, carried over 300,000 slaves to the islands, sold them for about £15,000,000, and made a profit of over 30 per cent.[36] Realism decreed, therefore, that England should not withdraw from the slave trade unless her maritime rivals, especially France, would do the same; and with England at war with France from 1793 to 1815, politicians could see little prospect of international cooperation on the issue of abolition.

For the sake of successful legislation in the House of Commons, Wilberforce took pains to answer self-interested and politic opponents of abolition. "Policy, however," he reminded the House, "is not my principle, and I am

[33]Wilberforce, *An Appeal in Behalf of the Negro Slaves*, 47–48.

[34]Cobbett, *Parliamentary History*, XXVIII, 60; cf. *Letter to Talleyrand*, 363.

[35]J. Holland Rose, A. P. Newton, and E. A. Benians (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the British Empire*, Vol. II: *The Growth of the New Empire, 1783–1870* (Cambridge, England, 1961), 189.

[36]Reginald Coupland, *Wilberforce* (London, 1945), 66.

not afraid to say it." His Evangelical religion being the mainspring of his morally fervent humanitarianism, he was convinced that neither economic necessity nor political expediency should lead a man to "contradict the dictates of his conscience, the principles of justice, the laws of religion, and of God." His conscience revolted against the system of slavery as he saw that under the "supposed inferiority of nature" all hope, intellect, and moral sensibility in the Negro were being slain. "There is a principle," he contended, "above everything that is political; and when I reflect upon the command which says: 'Thou shalt do no murder,' believing the authority to be Divine, how can I dare to set up any reasoning of my own against it?"[37]

Although the slave trade was abolished throughout the British Empire in 1807, by 1823 Wilberforce was still concerned that the old prejudice concerning Negro inferiority was still held as "a latent impression" and continued to "operate in the colonies, and to influence the minds of those who have the government of the slaves."[38] The Act of Emancipation was finally passed in 1833 (fittingly just before Wilberforce, having retired from Parliament, died), but that prejudicial "latent impression" persisted. No less a writer than Thomas Carlyle wrote sarcastically in 1849, in an essay entitled "The Nigger Question," that the West Indian Negroes were like "sweet blighted lilies," sitting dumbly "with their beautiful muzzles up to the ears in pumpkins," idly "imbibing sweet pulps and juices."[39] As late as 1896 one English writer contended that the Negroes' "inherent mental inferiority" was "almost more marked than their physical character."[40] Needless to say, the idea of Negro inferiority has had an even longer life in the United States.

But in the early nineteenth century some black Americans knew that they, as well as West Indian Negroes, were indebted to William Wilberforce. Shortly after his death in 1833, a large congregation gathered in the Second African Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia for a commemoration service. Wilberforce's "philanthropic and Christian benevolence" was eulogized; he was extolled for having "sufficiently learned the encampments and bulwarks of the enemy," and for understanding "what materials were necessary to be obtained to carry the citadel."[41] Wilberforce had led the political assault on the citadel of slavery in the British Empire and had simultaneously shown the rationalization of the system to be mere prejudice. The slave trade and the whole institution of slavery, stripped of the idea of Negro inferiority, proved to be defenseless.

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[37]Cobbett, *Parliamentary History*, XXVIII, 62–63. *The Life of William Wilberforce*, II, 22: "At one period, under one set of circumstances, it may be proper to push, at another, and in other circumstances, to withhold our efforts; but in the present instance, where the actual commission of guilt is in question, a man who *fears God* is not at liberty." According to Wilberforce's sons, his labors in the cause of aboliton were "the immediate consequences of his altered [religious] character" (*Ibid.*, I, 147). But for a more critical appraisal of the relationship of Wilberforce's Evangelical religion to his humanitarianism, see Ford K. Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians: The Age of Wilberforce* (Cambridge, England, 1961). [38]Wilberforce, *An Appeal in Behalf of the Negro Slaves*, 32.

[39]Thomas Carlyle, *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* (London, 1899), IV, 350.

[40]Basil Davidson, *The African Slave Trade. Precolonial History, 1450–1850* (Boston, 1961), 7.

[41]William Whipper, *Eulogy on William Wilberforce* (Philadelphia, 1833), 10, 19.