

Three Philosophers on Slavery

I. Aristotle

In ancient Greece, chattel slavery was common. (Chattel slavery is the ownership of a person by another in contrast to slaves bound to the land owned by another.) At the time of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, most households in Athens had at least one slave. Aristotle, in the first book of his *Politics* defends slavery.

On his view, there are two sorts of slaves: those who are reduced to slavery by virtue of being conquered (those who are slaves by law) and natural slaves: “For that some should rule and others be ruled is a thing not only necessary, but expedient; from the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjection, others for rule.” (*Politics* Bk 1, Ch. 5) It is not entirely clear what marks some people out for slavery, but he appears to claim that natural slaves suffer a defect of reason.

And it is clear that the rule of the soul over the body, and of the mind and the rational element over the passionate, is natural and expedient; whereas the equality of the two or the rule of the inferior is always hurtful. The same holds good of animals in relation to men; for tame animals have a better nature than wild, and all tame animals are better off when they are ruled by man; for then they are preserved. Again, the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules, and the other is ruled; this principle, of necessity, extends to all mankind.

Where then there is such a difference as that between soul and body, or between men and animals (as in the case of those whose business is to use their body, and who can do nothing better), the lower sort are by nature slaves, and it is better for them as for all inferiors that they should be under the rule of a master. For he who can be, and therefore is, another's and he who participates in rational principle enough to apprehend, but not to have, such a principle, is a slave by nature. (Bk 1, Ch. 5)

Many have argued that Aristotle was deluded in his suggestion that natural slaves are defective in the faculty of reason for two reasons: (1) Slaves obviously must use reason in order to perform their tasks, and (2) he sometimes suggests that barbarians, in general, i.e., non-Greeks, are all natural slaves. But he would certainly know that non-Greeks have developed sophisticated civilizations. As we have seen, Aristotle thought that there were multiple forms of reason, so the suggestion might be that natural slaves lack a certain “high” form of reason. But it is implausible that someone who lacks, e.g., a rather esoteric form of theoretical reason needs to be ruled by another.

Note, however, that Aristotle does not associate slavery with racial divisions, and in fact doesn't employ the concept of *race* at all.

II. Kant

It is shocking and bizarre from our point of view that theologians and philosophers who seemed to embrace the moral equality of all persons (the “brotherhood of mankind”) would tolerate slavery. There were exceptions, of course, and one might expect that Kant was one, given his formulation of the Categorical Imperative as the Principle of Humanity: “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means.” But interestingly, although Kant made clear that slavery was not permissible from the point of view of the CI and critiqued some contemporary slave practices, he never repudiated slavery.¹ In fact, Kant was tremendously influential in developing a theory of race that has been used to justify slavery.

Kant's *Groundwork*, which we studied, is part of his “pure” philosophy. It represents an ideal to strive for. In other work, he undertakes “impure” philosophy that takes into account the actual conditions of human life. According to his account of race, human racial differentiation has its source in four “seeds” that were

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McCarthy, Thomas. *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development*. Cambridge University Press, 2009. © Cambridge University Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

¹ I am drawing here on Thomas McCarthy's discussion in *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development*, Ch. 2.

present in our ancestors and have developed differently as a result of climactic and other influences. This is no different from what we find in other creatures, e.g.,

...in birds of the same species which can nevertheless live in different climates, there are seeds for the development of a new layer of feathers. These feathers appear when such birds live in cold climates, but they are held back when they live in temperate climates. (13)

The same phenomenon occurs in humans with the result that different races have developed in response to the different environmental demands. It is important, however, that once development has occurred, it cannot be undone, and “resists further transformation” because the dominant seed has “stifled the other seeds.” (21) The differences, however, are not merely physical, but include psychological dispositions. So, for example, the native American, having had to endure the extreme cold, suffers from a “half-extinguished life power” (17). And the Negro, because he has benefited from the rich land of Africa, is “strong, fleshy, and agile. However, because he is so amply supplied by his motherland, he is also lazy, indolent, and dawdling.” (17) Whites, however, have diverged least from the original form and the “noble blond form” characterized by its “tender white skin, reddish hair, and pale blue eyes” that inhabited the northern regions of Germany, is the strongest. This form itself does not constitute a race, but only a lineage within the white race. However, “This stock would have gotten on well enough to persist as a race if the further development of this deviation had not been so frequently interrupted by interbreeding with alien stocks.” (20)

So what Kant offers in his theory of race is similar to Aristotle’s account of the natural suitability of certain groups to being ruled or mastered, but distinguished by physical markers characteristic of people descended from certain geographical regions. Adding the supposed character differences, provides Kant and his followers a rationale for thinking that the source of the civilizing force in the world is Europe, that certain groups (Negros and native Americans, for example) are fit to be ruled, and that racial mixing is something to be avoided.

III. J. S. Mill

Mill, however, was strongly opposed to slavery. Not only that, he played an important role in the abolition of slavery in Britain.² One of the main arguments for the perpetuation of slavery, we have seen, is that it was “better” for slaves to be ruled. Moreover, it was “better” for the economy, and “better” for the development of human civilization. William Wilberforce, along with other abolitionists in Britain, argued that slavery was morally wrong. This generated a heated debate amongst economists at the time about whether or not it would be possible to end slavery. One important argument concerned whether individuals would work to produce goods beyond subsistence if they weren’t coerced to do so. Until the mid-18th century, “about 95% of the world’s population labored under one kind or another of involuntary servitude.” (Anderson 15) This question was pressing, for most believed that the possibility of civilization itself depended on the production of a surplus.

Without a surplus, a society cannot support occupations beyond subsistence: there will be no manufacturers, merchants, or financiers, no artists or scientists, no clergy or educators, no writers or publishers, no magistrates, civil servants, or navy. In other words, without a surplus, there is no civilization. (Anderson 16)

However, given the abolitionist arguments, in 1833, Britain passed an emancipation act. This was taken to be a great test of the economic hypothesis that free labor would be sufficient to produce a surplus sufficient to sustain civilization. After seven years the result of the experiment was that free labor produced a much smaller surplus than slave labor. This was no surprise: Slave owners would push their slaves to death! Britain faced an economic crisis. “Many plantations declared bankruptcy; merchant

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Anderson, Elizabeth. *Social Movements, Experiments in Living, and Moral Progress: Case studies from Britain’s Abolition of Slavery*. The University of Kansas, 2014. © The University of Kansas. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

² See Elizabeth Anderson, 2014. “Social Movements, Experiments in Living, and Moral Progress: Case Studies from Britain’s Abolition of Slavery.” Lindell Lecture, University of Kansas.

houses were ruined; and freed people's wages fell." (Anderson, 18) Many argued that there should be a return to slave labor. Mill, however, added his voice to the argument:

When justice and reason shall be the rule of human affairs, one of the first things to which we may expect them to be applied is the question, How many of the so-called luxuries, conveniences, refinements, and ornaments of life, are worth the labour which must be undergone as the condition of producing them? In opposition to the "gospel of work," I would assert the gospel of leisure, and maintain that human beings cannot rise to the finer attributes of their nature compatibly with a life filled with labour. . . . To reduce very greatly the quantity of work required to carry on existence, is as needful as to distribute it more equally; and the progress of science, and the increasing ascendancy of justice and good sense, tend to this result. (Mill, quoted in Anderson 21)

We see this also in the selection assigned for today:

But after allowing the full value of these considerations [in favor of the efficiency of slavery], it remains certain that slavery is incompatible with any high state of the arts of life, and any great efficiency of labor...hopeless slavery effectually brutifies the intellect...(II.5.4)

He concluded that Britain's role as the "armed propagator of slavery through every region of the earth into which its power could penetrate...will be a lasting blot in English history." (II.5.8)

IV. Questions and Observations

1. Is it surprising that the philosopher (Kant) who defended unconditional respect for all human beings was not outspoken in the condemnation of slavery?
2. Is it surprising that the philosopher (Mill) known for his defense of utilitarianism, which allows for the sacrifice of some to benefit many, was outspoken in his condemnation of slavery?
3. What does this tell us about these different moral theories? What does it tell us about the role of moral theory in moral life?

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