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Slavery Inconsistent with Justice and Good Policy

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PART 1274

SLAVERY

333

Virgory
1867

INCONSISTENT WITH

JUSTICE AND GOOD POLICY.

PROVED BY A

SPEECH,

DELIVERED IN THE CONVENTION,

HELD

AT DANVILLE, KENTUCKY.

BY THE REV. DAVID RICE.



PRINTED AT AUGUSTA, BY PETER EDES.

1804.

A

SPEECH, &c.

MR. CHAIRMAN,

I RISE, Sir, in support of the motion now before you. But my reverence for this body, the novelty of my present situation, the great importance and difficulty of the subject, and the thought of being opposed by gentlemen of the greatest abilities, has too sensible an impression on my mind. But, Sir, I know so much of my natural timidity, which increases with my years, that I foresaw this would be the case: I therefore prepared a speech for the occasion.

Sir, I have lived free, and in many respects happy for near sixty years; but my happiness has been greatly diminished, for much of the time, by hearing a great part of the human species groaning under the galling yoke of bondage. In this time I lost a venerable father, a tender mother, two affectionate sisters, and a beloved first born son; but all these together have not cost me half the anxiety as has been occasioned by this wretched situation of my fellow-men, whom without a blush I call my brethren. When I consider their deplorable state, and who are the cause of their misery, the load of misery that lies on them, and the load of guilt on us for imposing it on them; it fills my soul with anguish. I view their distresses, I read the anger of Heaven, I believe that if I should not exert myself, when, and as far, as in my power, in order to relieve them, I should be partaker of the guilt.

Sir, the question is, Whether slavery is consistent with justice and good policy? But before this is answered, it may be necessary to enquire, what a slave is.

A slave is a human creature made by law the property of another human creature, and reduced by mere power to an absolute unconditional subjection to his will.

This definition will be allowed to be just, with only this one exception, that the law does not leave the life and the limbs of the slave entirely in the master's power: and from it may be inferred several melancholy truths, which will include a sufficient answer to the main question.

In order to a right view of this subject, I would observe, that there are some cases, where a man may justly be made a slave by law. By vicious conduct he may forfeit his freedom; he may forfeit his life. Where this is the case, and the safety of the public

lic may be secured by reducing the offender to a state of slavery, it will be right; it may be an act of kindness. In no other case, if my conceptions are just, can it be vindicated on principles of justice or humanity.

As creatures of God we are, with respect to liberty, all equal. If one has a right to live among his fellow creatures, and enjoy his freedom, so has another; if one has a right to enjoy that property he acquires by an honest industry, so has another. If I by force take that from another, which he has a just right to according to the law of nature, (which is a divine law) which he has never forfeited, and to which he has never relinquished his claim, I am certainly guilty of injustice and robbery; and when the thing taken is the man's liberty, when it is himself, it is the greatest injustice. I injure him much more, than if I robbed him of his property on the high-way. In this case, it does not belong to him to prove a negative, but to me to prove that such forfeiture has been made, because, if it has not, he is certainly still the proprietor. All he has to do is to shew the insufficiency of my proofs.

A slave claims his freedom, he pleads that he is a man, that he was by nature free, that he has not forfeited his freedom, nor relinquished it. Now unless his master can prove that he is not a man, that he was not born free, or that he has forfeited or relinquished his freedom, he must be judged free; the justice of his claim must be acknowledged. His being long deprived of this right, by force or fraud, does not annihilate it, it remains; it is still his right. When I rob a man of his property, I leave him his liberty, and a capacity of acquiring and possessing more property; but when I deprive him of his liberty, I also deprive him of this capacity; therefore I do him greater injury, when I deprive him of his liberty, than when I rob him of his property. It is in vain for me to plead that I have the sanction of law; for this makes the injury the greater, it arms the community against him, and makes his case desperate.

If my definition of a slave is true, he is a rational creature reduced by the power of legislation to the state of a brute, and thereby deprived of every privilege of humanity, except as above, that he may minister to the ease, luxury, lust, pride, or avarice of another, no better than himself.

Would you want a law enacted that no owner of a brute, nor other person, should kill or dismember it, and then in law the case of a slave and a brute is in most respects parallel; and where they differ, the state of the brute is to be preferred. The brute may steal or rob, to supply his hunger; the law does not condemn him to die for his offence, it only permits his death; but the slave, though in the most starving condition, dare not do either, on penalty of death or some severe punishment.

Is there any need of arguments to prove, that it is in a high degree unjust and cruel, to reduce one human creature to such an abject

abject wretched state as this, that he may minister to the ease, luxury, or avarice of another? Has not that other the same right to have him reduced to this state, that he may minister to his interest or pleasure? On what is this right founded? Whence was it derived? Did it come from heaven, from earth, or from hell? Has the great King of heaven, the absolute sovereign disposer of all men, given this extraordinary right to white men over black men? Where is the charter? In whose hands is it lodged? Let it be produced and read, that we may know our privilege.

Thus reducing men is an indignity, a degradation to our own nature. Had we not lost a true sense of its worth and dignity, we should blush to see it converted into brutes. We should blush to see our houses filled, or surrounded with cattle in our own shapes. We should look upon it to be a fouler, a blacker stain, than that with which the vertical suns have tinged the blood of Africa. When we plead for slavery, we plead for the disgrace and ruin of our own nature. If we are capable of it we may ever after claim kindred with the brutes, and renounce our own superior dignity.

From our definition it will appear, that a slave is a creature made after the image of God, and accountable to him for the maintenance of innocence and purity; but by law reduced to a liability to be debauched by men, without any prospect or hope of redress.

That a slave is made after the image of God no Christian will deny; that a slave is absolutely subjected to be debauched by men, is so apparent from the nature of slavery, that it needs no proof. This is evidently the unhappy case of female slaves; a number of whom have been remarkable for their chastity and modesty. If their master attempts their chastity, they dare neither resist nor complain. If another man should make the attempt, though resistance may not be so dangerous, complaints are equally vain. They cannot be heard in their own defence, their testimony cannot be admitted. The injurious person has a right to be heard, may accuse the innocent sufferer of malicious slander, and have her severely chastised.

A virtuous woman, and virtuous Africans no doubt there are, esteems her chastity above every other thing; some have preferred it even to their lives: then forcibly to deprive her of this, is treating her with the greatest injustice. Therefore since law leaves the chastity of a female slave entirely in the power of her master; and greatly in the power of others, it permits this injustice; it provides no remedy, it refuses to redress this insufferable grievance; it denies even the small privilege of complaining.

From our definition it will follow, that a slave is a free moral agent legally deprived of free agency, and obliged to act according to the will of another free agent of the same species; and yet he is accountable to his Creator for the use he makes of his own free agency.

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When a man, though he can exist independent of another, cannot act independent of him, his agency must depend upon the will of that other ; and therefore he is deprived of his own free agency : and yet, as a free agent, he is accountable to his Maker for all the deeds done in the body. This comes to pass through a great omission and inconsistency in the legislature. They ought farther to have enacted, in order to have been consistent, that the slave should not have been accountable for any of his actions ; but that his master should have answered for him in all things, here and hereafter.

That a slave has the capacities of a free moral agent will be allowed by all. That he is, in many instances, deprived by law of the exercise of these powers, evidently appears from his situation. That he is accountable to his Maker for his conduct, will be allowed by those, who do not believe that human legislatures are omnipotent and can free men from this allegiance and subjection to the King of heaven.

The principles of conjugal love and fidelity in the breast of a virtuous pair, of natural affection in parents, and a sense of duty in children, are inscribed there by the finger of God ; they are the laws of heaven : but an enslaving law directly opposes them, and virtually forbids obedience. The relation of husband and wife, of parent and child, are formed by divine authority, and founded on the laws of nature. But it is in the power of a cruel master, and often of a needy creditor, to break these tender connections, and forever to separate these dearest relatives. This is ever done, in fact, at the call of interest or humour. The poor sufferers may expostulate ; they may plead ; may plead with tears ; their hearts may break ; but all in vain. The laws of nature are violated, the tender ties are dissolved, a final separation takes place, and the duties of these relations can no longer be performed, nor their comforts enjoyed. Would these slaves perform the duties of husbands and wives, parents and children ; the law disables them, it puts it altogether out of their power.

In these cases, it is evident that the laws of nature, or the laws of man, are wrong ; and which, none will be at a loss to judge. The divine law says, Whom God hath joined together, let no man put asunder ; the law of man says, to the master of the slave, Though the divine law has joined them together, you may put them asunder when you please. The divine law says, Train up your child in the way he should go ; the law of man says, You shall not train up your child, but as your master thinks proper. The divine law says, Honor your father and mother, and obey them in all things ; but the law of man says, Honor and obey your master in all things, and your parents just as far as he shall direct you.

Should a master command his slave to steal or rob, and he should presume to disobey, he is liable to suffer every extremity of punishment, short of death or amputation, from the hand of his master ;

master ; at the same time he is liable to a punishment equally severe, if not death itself, should he obey.

He is bound by law, if his master pleases, to do that, for which the law condemns him to death.

Another consequence of our definition is, That a slave, being a free moral agent, and an accountable creature, is a capable subject of religion and morality ; but deprived by law of the means of instruction in the doctrines and duties of morality, any further than his master pleases.

It is in the power of the master to deprive him of all the means of religious and moral instruction, either in private or in public. Some masters have actually exercised this power, and restrained their slaves from the means of instruction, by the terror of the lash. Slaves have not opportunity, at their own disposal, for instructing conversation ; it is put out of their power to learn to read ; and their masters may restrain them from other means of information. Masters designedly keep their slaves in ignorance, lest they should become too knowing to answer their selfish purposes ; and too wise to rest easy in their degraded situation. In this case the law operates so as to answer an end directly opposed to the proper end of all law. It is pointed against every thing dear to them ; against the principal end of their existence. It supports in a land of religious liberty, the severest persecutions ; and may operate so as totally to rob multitudes of their religious privileges, and the rights of conscience.

If my definition is just, a slave is one who is bound to spend his life in the service of another, to whom he owes nothing, is under no obligation ; who is not legally bound to find him victuals, clothes, medicine, or any other means of preservation, support or comfort.

That a slave is bound to spend his life in the service of his master, no one will dispute ; and that he is not indebted to his master, is under no obligations to him, is also evident. How can he possibly be indebted to him, who deprives him of liberty, property, and almost every thing dear to a human creature ? And all he receives is the bare means of subsistence ; and this not bestowed until he has earned it ; and then not in proportion to his labor ; nor out of regard to him, but for selfish purposes. This bare support the master is not bound by law to give ; but is left to be guided by his own interest or humour ; and hence the poor slave often falls short of what is necessary for the comfortable support of the body.

The master is the enemy of the slave ; he has made open war against him, and is daily carrying it on in unremitted efforts. Can any one then imagine, that the slave is indebted to his master, and bound to serve him ? Whence can the obligation arise ? What is it founded upon ? What is my duty to an enemy that is carrying on war against me ? I do not deny, but, in some circumstances, it is the duty of the slave to serve ; but it is a duty he owes himself, and

330 and not his master. The master may, and often does, inflict upon him all the severity of punishment the human body is capable of bearing ; and the law supports him in it : if he does but spare his life and his limbs, he dare not complain ; none can hear and relieve him ; he has no redress under heaven.

When we duly consider all these things, it must appear unjust to the last degree, to force a fellow creature, who has never forfeited his freedom, into this wretched situation ; and confine him and his posterity in this bottomless gulph of wretchedness for ever. Where is the sympathy, the tender feelings of humanity ? Where is the heart that does not melt at this scene of woe ? Or that is not fired with indignation to see such injustice and cruelty countenanced by civilized nations, and supported by the sanction of the law ?

If slavery is not consistent with justice, it must be inconsistent with good policy. For who would venture to assert, that it would be good policy for us to erect a public monument of our injustice, and that injustice is necessary for our prosperity, and happiness ? That old proverb, that honesty is the best policy, ought not to be despised for its age.

But the inconsistency of slavery with good policy will fully appear, if we consider another consequence of our definition, viz.

A slave is a member of civil society bound to obey the law of the land ; to which laws he never consented ; which partially and feebly protect his person ; which allow him no property ; from which he can receive no advantage ; and which chiefly, as they relate to him, were made to punish him. He is therefore bound to submit to a government, to which he owes no allegiance ; from which he receives great injury ; and to which he is under no obligations ; and to perform services to a society, to which he owes nothing and in whose prosperity he has no interest. That he is under this government, and forced to submit to it, appears from his suffering the penalties of its laws. That he receives no benefit by the laws and government he is under, is evident, from their depriving him of his liberty, and the means of happiness. Though they protect his life and his limbs, they confine him in misery, they will not suffer him to fly from it ; the greatest favours they afford him chiefly serve to perpetuate his wretchedness.

He is then a member of society, who is, properly speaking, in a state of war with his master, his civil rulers, and every member of that society. They are all his declared enemies, having, in him, made war upon almost every thing dear to a human creature. It is a perpetual war, with an avowed purpose of never making peace. This war, as it is unprovoked, is, on the part of the slave, properly defensive. The injury done him is much greater than what is generally esteemed a just ground of war between different nations ; it is much greater than was the cause of war between us and Britain.

It cannot be consistent with the principles of good policy to keep a numerous, a growing body of people among us, who add no strength

strength to us in time of war ; who are under the strongest temptations to join an enemy, as it is scarce possible they can lose, and may be great gainers, by the event ; who will count so many against us in an hour of danger and distress. A people whose interest it will be whenever in their power, to subvert the government, and throw all into confusion. Can it be safe ? Can it be good policy ? Can it be our interest or the interest of posterity, to nourish within our own bowels such an injured, inveterate foe, a foe, with whom we must be in a state of eternal war ? What havoc would a handful of savages, in conjunction with this domestic enemy, make in our country ! Especially at a period when the main body of the inhabitants were softened by luxury and ease, and quite unfitted for the hardships and dangers of war. Let us turn our eyes to the West-Indies ; and there learn the melancholy effects of this wretched policy. We may there read them written with the blood of thousands. There you may see the sable, let me say, the brave sons of Africa engaged in a noble conflict with their inveterate foes. There you may see thousands fired with a generous resentment of the greatest injuries, and bravely sacrificing their lives on the altar of liberty.

In America, a slave is a standing monument of the tyranny and inconsistency of human governments.

He is declared by the united voice of America, to be by nature free, and entitled to the privilege of acquiring and enjoying property ; and yet by laws past and enforced in these states, retained in slavery, and dispossessed of all property and capacity of acquiring any. They have furnished a striking instance of a people carrying on a war in defence of principles, which they are actually and avowedly destroying by legal force ; using one measure for themselves and another for their neighbours.

Every state, in order to gain credit abroad, and confidence at home, and to give proper energy to government, should study to be consistent ; their conduct should not disagree with their avowed principles, nor be inconsistent in its several parts. Consistent justice is the solid basis on which the fabric of government will rest securely ; take this away, and the building totters, and is liable to fall before every blast. It is, I presume, the avowed principles of each of us, that all men are by nature free, and are still entitled to freedom, unless they have forfeited it. Now, after this is seen and acknowledged, to enact that men should be slaves, against whom we have no evidence that they have forfeited their right ; what would it be but evidently to fly in our own face ; to contradict ourselves ; to proclaim before the world our own inconsistency ; and warn all men to repose no confidence in us ? After this, what credit can we ever expect ? What confidence can we repose in each other ? If we generally concur in this nefarious deed, we destroy mutual confidence, and break every link of the chain that should bind us together.

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Are we rulers ? How can the people confide in us, after we have thus openly declared that we are void of truth and sincerity ; and that we are capable of enslaving mankind in direct contradiction to our own principles ? What confidence in legislators, who are capable of declaring their constituents all free men in one breath ; and, in the next, enacting them all slaves ? In one breath, declaring that they have a right to acquire and possess property ; and, in the next, that they shall neither acquire nor possess it during their existence here ? Can I trust my life, my liberty, my property in such hands as these ? Will the colour of my skin prove a sufficient defence against their injustice and cruelty ? Will the particular circumstance of my ancestors being born in Europe, and not in Africa, defend me ? Will straight hair defend me from the blow that falls so heavy on the woolly head ?

If I am a dishonest man, if gain is my God, and this may be acquired by such an unrighteous law, I may rejoice to find it enacted ; but I never can believe that the legislature were honest men ; or repose the least confidence in them, when their own interest would lead them to betray it. I never can trust the integrity of the judge who can sit upon the seat of justice, and pass an unrighteous judgment, because it is agreeable to law ; when that law itself is contrary to the light and law of nature.

Where no confidence can be put in men of public trust, the exercise of government must be very uneasy, and the condition of the people extremely wretched. We may conclude, with the utmost certainty, that it would be bad policy to reduce matters to this unhappy situation.

Slavery naturally tends to sap the foundations of moral, and consequently of political virtue ; and virtue is absolutely necessary for the happiness and prosperity of a free people. Slavery produces idleness ; and idleness is the nurse of vice. A vicious commonwealth is a building erected on quicksand, the inhabitants of which can never abide in safety.

Young gentlemen, who ought to be the honour and support of the state, when they have in prospect an independent fortune consisting in land and slaves, which they can easily devolve on a faithful overseer or steward, become the most useless and insignificant members of society. There is no confining them to useful studies, or any business that will fit them for serving the public. They are employed in scenes of pleasure and dissipation. They corrupt each other ; they corrupt the morals of all around them : while their slaves, even in time of peace, are far from being equally useful to society with the same number of freemen ; and, in time of war, are to be considered as an enemy within our walls. I said they were useless, insignificant members of society. I should have said more ; I should have said, they are intolerable nuisances, pernicious pests of society. I mean not to reproach men of fortune ; I mean only to point out the natural tendency of slavery, in order to shew, how inconsistent it is with good policy.

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The prosperity of a country depends upon the industry of its inhabitants ; idleness will produce poverty : and when slavery becomes common, industry sinks into disgrace. To labour, is *to slave*; to work, is *to work like a Negro* : and this is disgraceful ; it levels us with the meanest of the species ; it sits hard upon the mind ; it cannot be patiently borne. Youth are hereby tempted to idleness, and drawn into other vices : they see no other way to keep their credit, and acquire some little importance. This renders them like those they ape, nuisances of society. It frequently tempts them to gaming, theft, robbery, or forgery ; for which they often end their days in disgrace on the gallows. Since every state must be supported by industry, it is exceedingly unwise to admit what will inevitably sink it into disgrace : and that this is the tendency of slavery is known for matter of fact.

Slavery naturally tends to destroy all sense of justice and equity. It puffs up the mind with pride ; teaches youth a habit of looking down upon their fellow creatures with contempt, esteeming them as dogs or devils, and imagining themselves beings of superior dignity and importance, to whom all are indebted. This banishes the idea, and unqualifies the mind for the practice of common justice. If I have, all my days, been accustomed to live at the expence of a black man, without making him any compensation, or considering myself at all in his debt, I cannot think it any great crime to live at the expence of a white man. If I rob a black man without guilt, I shall contract no great guilt by robbing a white man. If I have been long accustomed to think a black man was made for me, I may easily take it into my head to think so of a white man. If I have no sense of obligation to do justice to a black man, I can have little to do justice to a white man. In this case, the tinge of our skins, or the place of our nativity, can make but little difference. If I am in principle a friend to slavery, I cannot, to be consistent, think it any crime to rob my country of its property and freedom, whenever my interest calls, and I find it in my power. If I make any difference here, it must be owing to a vicious education, the force of prejudice, or pride of heart. If in principle a friend to slavery, I cannot feel myself obliged to pay the debt due to my neighbor. If I can wrong him of all his possessions, and avoid the law, all is well.

The destruction of chastity has a natural tendency to introduce a number of vices, that are very pernicious to the interest of a commonwealth ; and slavery much conduces to destroy chastity, as it puts so great a number of females entirely in the power of the other sex ; against whom they dare not complain, on peril of the lash ; and many of whom they dare not resist. This vice, this bane of society, has already become so common, that it is scarcely esteemed a disgrace, in the one sex, and that the one that is generally the most criminal. Let it become as little disgraceful in the other, and there is an end to domestic tranquility, an end to the public prosperity.

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It is necessary to our national prosperity, that the estates of the inhabitants of the country be greatly productive. But perhaps no estates, possessed in any part of the world, are less productive than those which consist in great numbers of slaves. In such estates there will be old and decrepid men and women, breeding women, and little children : all must be maintained. They labour only from servile principles, and therefore not to equal advantage with free men. They will labour as little, they will take as little care, as they possibly can. When their maintenance is deducted from the fruit of their labour, only a small pittance remains for the owner. Hence many, who are proud of their estates, and envied for their wealth, are living in poverty, and immersed in debt. Here are large estates to be taxed ; but small incomes to pay the taxes. This, while it gives us weight in the scale of the Union, will make us groan under the burden of our own importance.

Put all the above considerations together, and it evidently appears, that slavery is neither consistent with justice nor good policy. These are considerations, one would think, sufficient to silence every objection ; but I foresee, notwithstanding, that a number will be made, some of which have a formidable appearance.

It will be said, Negroes were made slaves by law, they were converted into property by an act of the legislature ; and under the sanction of that law I purchased them ; they therefore became my property, I have a legal claim to them. To repeal this law, to annihilate slavery, would be violently to destroy what I legally purchased with my money, or inherit from my father. It would be equally unjust with dispossessing me of my horses, cattle, or any other species of property. To dispossess me of their offspring would be injustice equal to dispossessing me of the annual profits of my estate. This is an important objection, and it calls for a serious answer.

The matter seems to stand thus : many years ago, men, being deprived of their natural right to freedom, and made slaves, were by law converted into property. This law, it is true, was wrong, it established iniquity ; it was against the law of humanity, common sense, reason, and conscience. It was, however, a law ; and under the sanction of it, a number of men, regardless of its iniquity, purchased these slaves, and made their fellow men their property.

The question is concerning the liberty of a man. The man himself claims it as his own property. He pleads, that it was originally his own ; that he has never forfeited, nor alienated it ; and therefore, by the common laws of justice and humanity, it is still his own. The purchaser of the slave claims the same property. He pleads, that he purchased it under the sanction of a law, enacted by the legislature ; and therefore it became his. Now, the question is, who has the best claim ? Did the property in question belong to the legislature ? Was it vested in them ? If legislatures are possessed of such property as this, may another never exist !

ist ! No individual of their constituents could claim it as his own inherent right ; it was not in them collectively ; and therefore they could not convey it to their representatives. Was it ever known, that a people chose representatives to create and transfer this kind of property ? The legislature were not, they could not be possessed of it ; and therefore could not transfer it to another ; they could not give what they themselves had not. Now does the property belong to him, who received it from a legislature that had it not to give, and by a law they had no right to enact ; or to the original owner, who has never forfeited, nor alienated his right ? If a law should pass for selling an innocent man's head, and I should purchase it ; have I in consequence of this law and this purchase, a better claim to this man's head than he has himself ?

To call our fellow-men, who have not forfeited, nor voluntarily resigned their liberty, our property, is a gross absurdity, a contradiction to common sense, and an indignity to human nature. The owners of such slaves then are the licenced robbers, and not the just proprietors, of what they claim : freeing them is not depriving them of property, but restoring it to the right owner ; it is suffering the unlawful captive to escape. It is not wronging the master, but doing justice to the slave, restoring him to himself. The matter, it is true, is wronged, he may suffer and that greatly : but this is his own fault, and the fault of the enslaving law ; and not of the law that does justice to the oppressed.

You say, a law of emancipation would be unjust, because it would deprive men of their property ; but is there no injustice on the other side ? Is nobody intitled to justice, but slave-holders ? Let us consider the injustice on both sides ; and weigh them in an even balance. On the one hand, we see a man deprived of all property, of all capacity to possess property, of his own free agency, of the means of instruction, of his wife, of his children, of almost every thing dear to him : on the other, a man deprived of eighty or an hundred pounds. Shall we hesitate a moment to determine, who is the greatest sufferer, and who is treated with the greatest injustice ? The matter appears quite glaring, when we consider, that neither this man, nor his parents had sinned, that he was born to these sufferings ; but the other suffers altogether for his own sin, and that of his predecessors.—Such a law would only take away property, that is its own property, and not ours : property that has the same right to possess us, as its property, as we have to possess it : property that has the same right to convert our children into dogs, and calves, and colts, as we have to convert theirs into these beasts : property that may transfer our children to strangers, by the same right that we transfer theirs.

Human legislatures should remember, that the act in subordination to the great Ruler of the universe, have no right to take the government out of his hand nor to enact laws contrary to his ; that if they should presume to attempt it, they cannot make that right,

right, which he has made wrong ; they cannot dissolve the allegiance of his subjects, and transfer it to themselves, and thereby free the people from their obligations to obey the laws of nature. The people should know, that legislatures have not this power ; and that a thousand laws can never make that innocent, which the divine law has made criminal ; or give them a right to that, which the divine law forbids them to claim. But to the above reply it may be farther objected, that neither we nor the legislature, enslaved the Africans : but they enslaved one another, and we only purchased those, whom they had made prisoners of war, and reduced to slavery.

Making prisoners of war slaves, though practised by the Romans and other ancient nations, and though still practised by some barbarous tribes, can by no means be justified ; it is unreasonable and cruel. Whatever may be said of the chief authors and promoters of an unjust war, the common soldier who is under command and obliged to obey, and as is often the case, deprived of the means of information as to the grounds of the war, certainly cannot be thought guilty of a crime so heinous, that for it himself and posterity deserve the dreadful punishment of perpetual servitude. It is a cruelty that the present practice of all civilized nations bears testimony against. Allow then the matter objected to be true, and it will not justify our practice of enslaving the Africans. But the matter contained in the objection is only true in part. The history of the slave trade is too tragical to be read without a bleeding heart and weeping eyes.

A few of these unhappy Africans, and comparatively very few, are criminals, whose servitude is inflicted as a punishment for their crimes. The main body are innocent, unsuspecting creatures, free, living in peace, doing nothing to forfeit the common privileges of men. They are stolen, or violently borne away by armed force, from their country, their parents, and all their tender connections ; treated with an indignity and indecency shameful to mention, and a cruelty shocking to all the tender feelings of humanity ; and they and their posterity forced into a state of servitude and wretchedness for ever. It is true they are commonly taken prisoners by Africans ; but it is the encouragement given by Europeans that tempts the Africans to carry on these unprovoked wars. They furnish them with the means, and hold out to them a reward for their plunder. If the Africans are thieves, the Europeans stand ready to receive the stolen goods : if the former are robbers, the latter furnish them with arms, and purchase the spoil. In this case who is the most criminal, the civilized European, or the untutored African ? the European merchants know, that they themselves are the great encouragers of these wars, as they are the principal gainers by the event. They furnish the sinews, add the strength, and receive the gain. They know, that they purchase these slaves of those, who have no just pretence to claim them as theirs. The African can give the European no better claim than
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he himself has ; the European merchant can give us no better claim than is vested in him ; and that is one founded only in violence or fraud.

In confirmation of this account might be produced many substantial vouchers, and some who had spent much time in this nefarious traffic. But such as are accustomed to listen to the melancholy tales of these unfortunate Africans, cannot want sufficient evidence. Those who have seen multitudes of poor innocent children driven to market, and sold like beasts, have it demonstrated before their eyes.

It will be farther objected, that in our situations, the abolition of slavery would be bad policy ; because it would discourage emigrants from the Eastward, prevent the population of this country, and consequently its opulence and strength.

I doubt not but it would prevent a number of slave-holders from coming into this country, with their slaves. But this would be far, very far from being an evil. It would be a most desirable event ; it would be keeping out a great and intolerable nuisance, the bane of every country where it is admitted, the cause of ignorance and vice, and of national poverty and weakness. On the other hand, if I mistake not, it would invite five useful citizens into our state, where it would keep out one slave-holder : and who would not rejoice in the happy exchange ? Turn your eyes to the Eastward ; behold numerous shoals of slaves, moving towards us, in thick succession. Look to the Westward ; see a large, vacant, fertile country, lying near, easy of access, an asylum for the miserable, a land of liberty. A man, who has no slaves, cannot live easy and contented in the midst of those, who possess them in numbers. He is treated with neglect, and often with contempt : he is not a companion for his free neighbours, but only for their more reputable slaves : his children are looked upon and treated by theirs as underlings. These things are not easy to bear ; they render his mind uneasy, and his situation unpleasant. When he sees an open way to remove from this situation, and finds it may be done consistent with his interest, he will not long abide in it. When he removes, his place is filled up with slaves. Thus this country will spew out its white inhabitants ; and be peopled with slave-holders, their slaves, and a few, in the highest posts of a poor free man, I mean that of an overseer. When we attentively view and consider our situation, with relation to the East and the West, we may be assured that this event will take place, that the progress towards it will be exceedingly rapid, and greatly accelerated by the fertility of our soil.

That this, on supposition that slavery should continue, would soon be the state of population in this country, is not only possible, but very probable ; not only probable but morally certain. But is this a desirable situation ? Would it be safe, and comfortable ? Would it be so, even to masters themselves ? I presume not : especially when I consider, that their near neighbors, beyond the Ohio,

Ohio, could not, consistent with their principles, assist them, in case of a domestic insurrection. Suppose our inhabitants should be fewer; they would be useful citizens, who could repose a mutual confidence in each other. To increase the inhabitants of this state by multiplying an enemy within our own bowels; an enemy, with whom we are in a state of perpetual war, and can never make peace, is very far from being an object of desire: especially if we consider, that a belief of the iniquity of this servitude is fast gaining ground. Should this sentiment obtain the general belief, what might be the event? What would be the situation of a certain description of men? What the condition of this country?

Another frightful objection to my doctrine is, That should we set our slaves free, it would lay a foundation for intermarriages and an unnatural mixture of blood, and our posterity at length would all be Mulattoes.

This effect, I grant, it would produce. I also grant, that this appears very unnatural to persons labouring under our prejudices of education. I acknowledge my own pride remonstrates against it; but it does not influence my judgment, nor affect my conscience.

To plead this as a reason for the continuation of slavery, is to plead the fear that we should disgrace ourselves, as a reason why we should do injustice to others: to plead that we may continue in guilt, for fear the features and complexion of our posterity should be spoiled. We should recollect, that it is too late to prevent this great imaginary evil; the matter is already gone beyond recovery; for it may be proved, with mathematical certainty, that, if things go on in the present channel, the future inhabitants of America will inevitably be Mulattoes.

How often have men children by their own slaves, by their fathers' slaves, or the slaves of their neighbours? How fast is the number of Mulattoes increasing in every part of the land? Visit the towns and villages to the Eastward; visit the seats of gentlemen, who abound in slaves; and see how they swarm on every hand? All the children of Mulattoes will be Mulattoes, and the whites are daily adding to the number; which will continually encrease the proportion of Mulattoes. Thus this evil is coming upon us in a way much more disgraceful, and unnatural, than intermarriages. Fathers will have their own children for slaves, and leave them as an inheritance to their children. Men will possess their brothers and sisters as their property, leave them to their heirs, or sell them to strangers. Youth will have their grey-headed uncles and aunts for slaves, call them their property, and transfer them to others. Men will humble their own sisters, or even their aunts, to gratify their lust. An hard-hearted master will not know whether he has a blood relation, a brother or a sister, an uncle or an aunt, or a stranger of Africa, under his scourging hand. This is not the work of imagination; it has been frequently realized.

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The worst that can be made of this objection, ugly as it is, that it would be hastening an evil in an honest way which we are already bringing on ourselves in a way that is absolutely dishonest, perfectly shameful, and extremely criminal. This objection then can have no weight with a reasonable man, who can divest himself of his prejudices and his pride, and view the matter as really circumstanced. The evil is inevitable ; but as it is a prejudice of education, it would be an evil only in its approach ; as it drew near, it would decrease ; when fully come, it would cease to exist.

Another objection to my doctrine, and that esteemed by some the most formidable, still lies before me : an objection taken from the sacred scriptures. There will be produced on the occasion, the example of faithful Abraham, recorded Gen. xvii. and the law of Moses, recorded in Lev. xxv. The injunctions laid upon servants in the gospel, particularly by the Apostle Paul, will also be introduced here. These will all be directed, as formidable artillery, against me, and in defence of absolute slavery.

From the passage in Genesis, it is argued, by the advocates for perpetual slavery, that since Abraham had servants born in his house and bought with money, they must have servants for life, like our negroes : and hence they conclude, that it is lawful for us to purchase heathen servants, and if they have children born in our houses, to make them servants also. From the law of Moses it is argued, that the Israelites were authorised to leave the children of their servants, as an inheritance to their own children forever : and hence it is inferred that we may leave the children of our slaves as an inheritance to our children forever. If this was immoral in itself, a just God would never have given it the sanction of his authority ; and, if lawful in itself, we may safely follow the example of Abraham, or act according to the law of Moses.

None, I hope, will make this objection, but those who believe these writings to be of divine authority ; for if they are not so, it is little to the purpose to introduce them here. If you grant them to be of divine authority, you will also grant, that they are consistent with themselves, and that one passage may help to explain another. Grant me this ; and then I reply to the objection.

In the 12th verse of the 17th of Genesis, we find that Abraham was commanded to circumcise all that were born in his house, or bought with money. We find in the sequel of the chapter, that he obeyed the command without delay ; and actually circumcised every male in his family, who came under this description. This law of circumcision continued in force ; it was not repealed, but confirmed by the law of Moses.

Now, to the circumcised were committed the oracles of God ; and circumcision was a token of that covenant by which, among other things, the land of Canaan, and their various privileges in it, were promised to Abraham and his seed ; to all that were included in that covenant. All were included, to whom cir-

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 circumcision, which was the token of the covenant, was administered agreeably to God's command. By divine appointment, not only Abraham and his natural seed, but he that was bought with money of any stranger that was not of his seed, was circumcised. Since the seed of the stranger received the token of this covenant, we must believe, that he was included, and interested in it; that the benefits promised were to be conferred on him. These persons bought with money were no longer looked upon as uncircumcised and unclean, as aliens and strangers; but were incorporated with the church and nation of the Israelites; and became one people with them; became God's covenant people. Whence it appears, that suitable provision was made by the divine law that they should be properly educated, made free, and enjoy all the common privileges of citizens. It was by the divine law enjoined upon the Israelites; thus to circumcise all the males born in their houses; then if the purchased servants in question had any children, their masters were bound by law to incorporate them into their church and nation. These children then were the servants of the Lord, in the same sense as the natural descendants of Abraham were; and therefore, according to the law, Lev. xxv. 42, 55. they could not be made slaves. The passages of scripture under consideration were so far from authorising the Israelites to make slaves of their servants' children, that they evidently forbid it; and therefore are so far from proving the lawfulness of our enslaving the children of the Africans, that they clearly condemn the practice as criminal.

These passages of sacred writ have been wickedly pressed into the service of Mammon, perhaps more frequently than any others; but does it not now appear, that these weighty pieces of artillery may be fairly wrested from the enemy, and turned upon the hosts of the Mammonites, with very good effect?

The advocates for slavery should have observed, that in the law of Moses referred to, there is not the least mention made of the children of these servants, it is not said that they should be servants, or any thing about them. No doubt some of them had children, but it was unnecessary to mention them; because they were already provided for by the law of circumcision.

To extend the law of Moses to the children of these servants, is arbitrary and presumptuous; it is making them include much more than is expressed or necessarily implied in the text. It cannot be necessarily implied in the expression, *They shall be your bond men forever*; because the word *forever* is evidently limited by the nature of the subject; and nothing appears, by which it can be more properly limited, than the life of the servants purchased. The sense then is simply this, they shall serve you and your children as long as they live.

We cannot certainly determine how these persons were made servants at first; nor is it necessary we should. Whether they were persons who had forfeited their liberty by capital crimes;

or whether they had involved themselves in debt by folly or extravagance, and submitted to serve during their lives, in order to avoid a greater calamity; or whether they were driven to that necessity in their younger days, for want of friends to take care of them, we cannot tell. This however we may be sure of, that the Israelites were not sent by a divine law to nations three thousand miles distant, who were neither doing, nor meditating any thing against them, and with whom they had nothing to do; in order to captivate them by fraud or force, tear them away from their country and all their tender connections, bind them in chains, crowd them into ships, and there murder them by thousands, with the want of air and exercise; and then condemn the survivors and their posterity to slavery for ever.

But it is further objected, that the Apostle advises servants to be contented with their state of servitude, and obedient to their masters; and though he charges their masters to use them well, he no where commands them to set them free.

In order rightly to understand the matter, we should recollect the situation of Christians at this time. They were under the Roman yoke, the government of the heathen; who were watching every opportunity of charging them with designs against their government, in order to justify their bloody persecutions. In such circumstances, for the Apostle to have proclaimed liberty to the slaves, would probably have exposed many of them to certain destruction, brought ruin on the Christian cause, and that without the prospect of freeing one single man; which would have been the height of madness and cruelty. It was wise, it was humane in him not to drop a single hint on this subject, farther than saying, *If thou mayest be made free, use it rather.*

Though the Apostle acted with this prudent reserve, the unreasonableness of perpetual unconditional slavery, may easily be inferred from the righteous and benevolent doctrines and duties taught in the New Testament. It is quite evident, that slavery is contrary to the spirit and genius of the Christian religion. It is contrary to that excellent precept laid down by the divine author of the Christian institution, viz. *Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you do ye even so to them.* A precept so finely calculated to teach the duties of justice, to enforce their obligation, and induce the mind to obedience, that nothing can excel it. No man, when he views the hardships, the sufferings, the excessive labours, the unreasonable chastisements, the separations between loving husbands and wives, between affectionate parents, and children, can say, were I in their place, I should be contented; I so far approve this usage, as to believe the law that subjects me to it, to be perfectly right: that I and my posterity should be denied the protection of law, and by it be exposed to suffer all these calamities; though I never forfeited my freedom, nor merited such treatment, more than others. No; there is an honest SOMETHING in our breasts, that bears testimony against this, as unreasonable and wicked. I found it in my own breast near forty years ago, and

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through all the changes of time, the influence of custom, the arts of sophistry, and the fascinations of interest, remains here still. I believe, it is a law of my nature ; a law of more ancient date than any act of parliament ; and which no human legislature can ever repeal. It is a law inscribed on every human heart ; and may there be seen in legible characters, unless it is blotted by vice, or the eye of the mind blinded by interest. Should I do any thing to countenance this evil, I should fight against my own heart ; should I not use my influence to annihilate it, my own conscience would condemn me.

It may be farther objected, this slavery, it is true, is a great evil ; but still greater evils would follow their emancipation. Men who have laid out their money in purchase of slaves, and now have little other property, would certainly be great sufferers ; the slaves themselves are unacquainted with the arts of life, being used to act only under the direction of others ; they have never acquired the habits of industry ; have not that sense of propriety and spirit of emulation necessary to make them useful citizens. Many have been so long accustomed to the meaner vices, habituated to lying, pilfering and stealing, that when pinched with want, they would commit these crimes, become pests to society, or end their days on the gallows. Here are evils on both hands, and of two evils, we should take the least.

This is a good rule, when applied to natural evils ; but with moral evils it has nothing to do ; for of these we must chuse neither. Of two evils, the one natural, the other moral, we must always chuse the natural evil ; for moral evil, which is the same thing as sin, can never be a proper object of choice. Enslaving our fellow creatures is a moral evil ; some of its effects are moral, and some natural. There is no way so proper to avoid the moral effects as by avoiding the cause. The natural evil effects of emancipation can never be a balance for the moral evils of slavery, or a reason why we should prefer the latter to the former.

Here we should consider, on whom these evils are to be charged ; and we shall find they lie at our own doors, they are chargeable on us. We have brought one generation into this wretched state ; and shall we therefore doom all the generations of their posterity to it ? Do we find by experience, that this state of slavery corrupts and ruins human nature ? And shall we persist in corrupting and ruining it in order to avoid the natural evils we have already produced ? Do we find, as the ancient Poet said, that the day we deprive a man of freedom, we take away half his soul ? and shall we continue to maim souls, because a maimed soul is unfit for society ! Strange reasoning indeed ! An astonishing consequence ! I should have looked for a conclusion quite opposite to this, viz. that we should be sensible of the evil of our conduct, and persist in it no longer. To me this appears a very powerful argument against slavery, and a convincing proof of its iniquity. It is ruining God's creatures whom he has made free moral agents, and accountable beings ;

beings ; creatures who still belong to him ; and are not left to us to ruin at our pleasure.

However, the objection is weighty, and the difficulty suggested great. But I do not think, that it is such as ought to deter us from our duty, or tempt us to continue a practice so inconsistent with justice and sound policy : therefore I give it as my opinion, that the first thing to be done is **TO RESOLVE, UNCONDITIONALLY, TO PUT AN END TO SLAVERY IN THIS STATE.** This, I conceive, properly belongs to the convention ; which they can easily effect, by working the principle into the constitution they are to frame.

If there is not in government some fixed principle superior to all law, and above the power of legislators, there can be no stability, or consistency in it ; it will be continually fluctuating with the opinions, humours, passions, prejudices, or interests, of different legislative bodies. Liberty is an inherent right of man, of every man ; the existence of which ought not to depend upon the mutability of legislation ; but should be wrought into the very constitution of our government, and be made essential to it.

The devising ways and means to accomplish this end, so as shall best consist with the public interest, will be the duty of our future legislature. This evil is a tree that has been long planted, it has been growing many years, it has taken deep root, its trunk is large, and its branches extended wide ; should it be cut down suddenly, it might crush all that grew near it ; should it be violently eradicated, it might tear up the ground in which it grows, and produce fatal effects. It is true, the slaves have a just claim to be freed instantly : but by our bad conduct, we have rendered them incapable of enjoying, and properly using this their birth-right ; and therefore a gradual emancipation only can be advisable. The limbs of this tree must be lopped off by little and little, the trunk gradually hewn down, and the stump and roots left to rot in the ground.

The legislature, if they judged it expedient, would prevent the importation of any more slaves : they would enact that all born after such a date should be born free : be qualified by proper education to make useful citizens, and be actually freed at a proper age.

It is no small recommendation of this plan, that it so nearly coincides with the Mosaic law, in this case provided ; to which even suppose it a human institution, great respect is due to its antiquity, its justice and humanity.

It would, I think, avoid in a great measure, all the evils mentioned in the objection. All that was the master's own, at the time fixed upon in the act, would still be his own : All that should descend from them would be his own until he was paid for their education. All he would lose would be the prospect of his children's being enriched at the expence of those who are unborn. Would any man murmur at having this prospect, which was given him by an iniquitous law, and cannot be enjoyed without guilt, cut off by a righteous law, that frees from oppression future generations ?

Is there any such man to be found? Let us stop a moment to hear his complaint. "I have long lived happy by oppression. I wanted to leave this privilege as an inheritance to my children. I had a delightful prospect of their living also in ease and splendour at the expence of others; this iniquity was once sanctified by a law, of which I hoped my children's children would have enjoyed the sweets; but now this hard-hearted, this cruel convention has cut off this pleasing prospect.

"They will not suffer my children to live in ease and luxury, at the expence of poor Africans. They have resolved, and alas! the resolution must stand forever, that black men in the next generation shall enjoy the fruit of their own labour, as well as white men; and be happy according to the merit of their own conduct. If justice is done to the offspring of negroes, mine are eternally ruined. If my children cannot, as I have done, live in injustice and cruelty, they are injured, they are robbed, they are undone. What—must young master saddle his own horse?—Must pretty little miss sweep the house and wash the dishes? and these black devils be free!—No heart can bear it!—Such is the difference between us and them, that it is a greater injury to us to be deprived of their labour, than it is to them to be deprived of their liberty and every thing else. This wicked convention will have to answer another day for the great injury they have done us, in doing justice to them."

Emancipation on some such plan as above hinted, would probably, in many instances, be a real advantage to children in point of wealth. Parents would educate them in such a manner, and place them in such circumstances, as would be more to their interest, than possessing such unproductive estates as slaves are found to be.

The children would imbibe a noble independent spirit, learn a habit of managing business, and helping themselves. They would learn to scorn the mean and beggarly way of living, at the expence of others, living in splendour on plunder of the innocent. Where estates were wisely managed, children would not find their fortunes diminished. They would not be mocked with nominal, but possess real wealth; wealth that would not merely feed their vanity, but fill their coffers.

The children of the slaves, instead of being ruined for want of education, would be so brought up as to become useful citizens. The country would improve by their industry; manufactures would flourish; and, in time of war, they would not be the terror, but the strength and defence of the state.

It may be farther objected, that to attempt, even in this gradual way, the annihilation of slavery in this country, where so many are deeply interested, might so sensibly touch the interest of some unreasonable men, as probably to stir up great confusion, and endanger the tranquillity of our infant state.

Though I doubt not but some men of narrow minds, under the influence of prejudice or covetousness, might be made uneasy and disposed

disposed to clamour ; yet I apprehend but little danger of any ill effects. The measure would be so agreeable to the honest dictates of conscience, the growing sentiments of the country, and of many even of the slave-holders themselves, that any opposition they might make would not be supported ; and they would be too wise to hazard the hastening an event they so much dread.

If the growing opinion of the unlawfulness of slavery should continue to grow, holding men in that state will soon be impracticable ; there will be no cause existing sufficient to produce the effect, when this shall happen a certain event may suddenly take place, the consequences of which may be very disagreeable. This I take to be the proper time to prevent this evil. We may now do it in a peaceable manner, without going a step out of the way of our duty, and without hazarding what might be attended with tenfold more confusion and danger.

The slavery of the negroes began in iniquity ; a curse has attended it, and a curse will follow it. National vices will be punished with national calamities. Let us avoid these vices, that we may avoid the punishment which they deserve ; and endeavour so to act, as to secure the approbation and smiles of Heaven.

Holding men in slavery is the national vice of Virginia ; and while a part of that state, we were partakers of the guilt. As a separate state, we are just now come to the birth ; and it depends upon our free choice whether we shall be born in this sin, or innocent of it. We now have it in our power to adopt it as our national crime ; or to bear a national testimony against it. I hope the latter will be our choice ; that we shall wash our hands of this guilt ; and not leave it in the power of a future legislature, ever more to stain our reputation or our conscience with it.

THE END.

This work is re-printed at the request of many persons, some of whom belong to the SOCIETY OF FRIENDS, to whom it is now dedicated.—It may, with their assistance, tend to aid the views of our Legislature in abolishing the representation of slaves, and eventually of the existence of slavery in this country.