

# Natural Law, Literary Accommodation and the Successful Social Justice Movement

Thomas Reid's Natural Law Philosophy and the Abolitionist Writings of Olaudah Equiano and Ottobah Cugoano

Patrick Miller  
Stephanie Carpenter, PhD

Department of History and Political Science, Andrews University

## Introduction

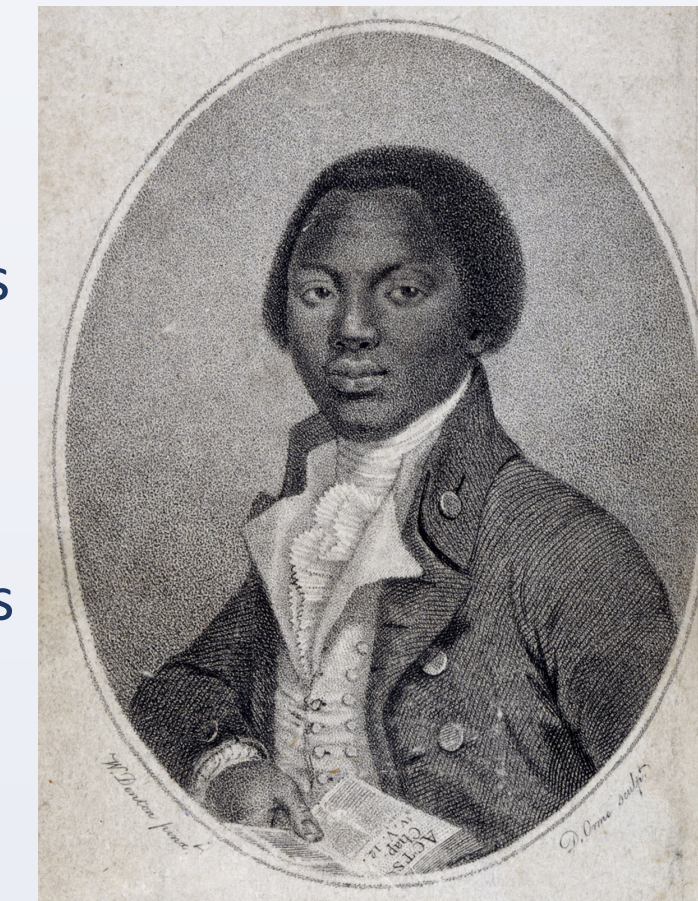
Natural law philosophy, based on the idea that observation of the natural world can lead to conclusions about morality, has largely been sidelined in modern conversations about ethics. However, it played an important part in one of the greatest moral struggles of western society, the abolition of slavery, both by producing a coherent set of arguments against the practice and, as I will argue, promoting a method of communication by which those arguments were to be successfully delivered. In this project I will seek to demonstrate how natural law philosophy lead early abolitionists to prioritize a literary style that seeks common ground on a basis of universal human identity. The practice of literary accommodation, or the use of language, metaphors, and methods of argumentation with which an intended audience will identify, was adopted by Olaudah Equiano and Ottobah Cugoano, two freed slaves who were members of an 18<sup>th</sup> century English abolitionist society known as the Sons of Africa. I will establish a connection between Equiano and Cugoano's thought and Thomas Reid, founder of the Scottish School of Common Sense and natural law scholar. He elucidated the importance of mutually recognized language and logical structure for a functioning framework of natural rights, an idea that I argue facilitates the use of a language of accommodation

## Objectives

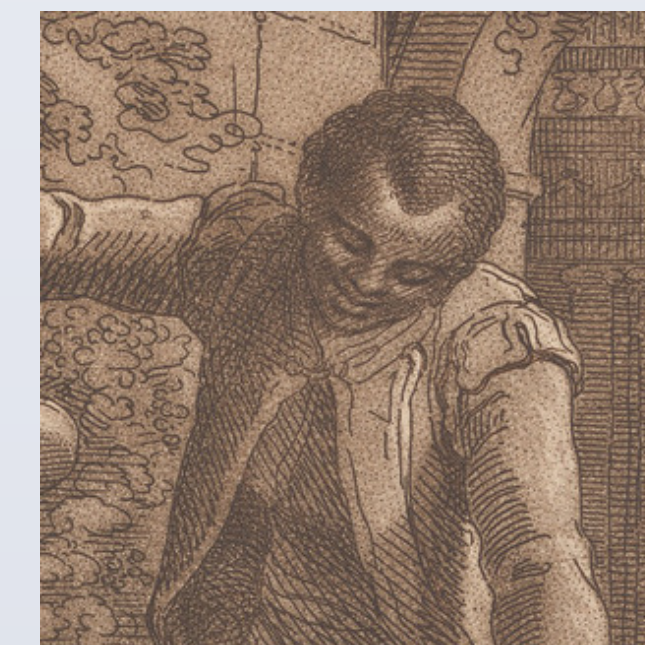
- Illustrate how Thomas Reid's emphasis on the primacy of a commonly held linguistic and logical framework for determining whether other actors have rationality and therefore rights was adopted by the wider Scottish School of Common Sense, of which he was the founder.
- Establish the importance which the Scottish School's natural law tradition had for English abolitionist movements through historical documents and supporting historical authorship.
- Demonstrate that the Sons of Africa were a part of and influenced by the wider English abolitionism movement in their adoption of Natural Law based arguments, therefore making an encounter with Thomas Reid's ideas extremely likely due to the prevalence of Scottish School philosophy in abolitionist circles at the time.
- Locate references to natural law philosophy within the works of Equiano and Cugoano, comparing their formulations to that of Thomas Reid.
- Argue that Thomas Reid's philosophy of natural law promotes the use of a rhetoric of accommodation due to the importance it places on a shared linguistic/logical framework as an indicator of shared rights.
- Illustrate how Cugoano and Equiano made use of accommodationist rhetoric, noting the different ways they used the technique and how it benefited them in reaching their intended audience.
- Propose a causal relationship between Cugoano and Equiano's natural law understanding and their accommodationist methods of narrative and argumentation.

## Biographies

**Olaudah Equiano:** An educated slave who purchased his freedom from a possibly guilt ridden Quaker master in Jamaica in 1766, and entered into a business partnership with him. However, Equiano would soon learn that there was no true freedom for a black man in the British Empire as he was nearly forced into slavery yet again in the then English colony of Georgia. This motivated Equiano to return to the Isle of Britain and begin his campaign against slavery, writing his best-selling autobiography and going on extensive speaking tours relating his experiences.



**Ottobah Cugoano:** Also a freed slave who devoted his efforts towards articulating a critique of the practice of slavery. In 1770 he was kidnapped and forced into slavery from his homeland in what is present day Ghana, worked on a plantation in Grenada for 2 years, and was then sold to an English master. He gained his freedom upon arriving in England due to the *Somerset Case*, which made chattel slavery illegal on the island, but not throughout the British Empire.



## Terms

**Natural Law:** Thomas Aquinas was the first theologian/philosopher to articulate a natural law ethic. All other natural law philosophies flow from his body of work. The first axiom of natural law for Aquinas was that God has placed within the natural world discernable qualities that present guiding principles, and an alternative source of revelation. Humans, though flawed, are also a part of the natural world, and we can ascertain natural law principles through observing them

**Accommodationist:** The definition of the term "accommodationist," as found in the Oxford English Dictionary, states: "a person considered willing to compromise with opponents in order to preserve social or political stability," and also "Of or relating to accommodationists or their methods; tending to seek or promote compromise." The Oxford definition mentions that the term accommodationist has often been used in a pejorative manner, especially when in reference to black authors; against this characterization I will argue that Equiano and Cugoano are accommodationists in a laudable sense, and that their search for grounds of compromise with their audience is worth emulating.

## Materials and Methods

My primary materials are these writings by my selected historical figures: Ottobah Cugoano's *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery* (1787), Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, The African* (1789), and Thomas Reid's *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (1764), as well as his assorted essays on the topic of natural law philosophy; specifically, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (1785).

**Comparative Textual Analysis:** According to the Harvard Writing Guide there are two types of comparative analysis, "Classic" comparison, in which you "weigh both A and B equally," and "keyhole" or "lens" comparison, where "A is used as a lens through which to view B." First I utilize the "keyhole" method of comparison to analyze Cugoano and Equiano's work through the lens of Thomas Reid's natural law philosophy. Specifically, I look for places where he may have influenced their conception of natural law and chosen methods of argumentation. There is a further layer of complexity to my comparative analysis, which is due to the fact that Cugoano put more effort into developing a comprehensive philosophy of natural law. This compensates for a dearth of philosophical reasoning on the part of Equiano, who uses natural law language, but does not explore the concept in great detail. I therefore focus on Cugoano with my "keyhole" analysis of Reid's influence, but use "Classic" comparative analysis to connect the writings of Equiano and Cugoano. However, accommodationist language, which I view as a logical application of Thomas Reid's philosophy to literary methods, is more prevalent in Equiano's work. Thus, an *Interesting Narrative* and *Thoughts and Sentiments* go hand in hand, supplementing each other in the way that they support my thesis of Thomas Reid's influence within the Sons of Africa.

**Historical Contextual Analysis:** The Harvard resource on writing historical essays states "Secondary sources are materials produced after the time period under study; they consider the historical subject with a degree of hindsight and generally select, analyze, and incorporate evidence to make an argument." It is from secondary sources which I construct my contextual analysis and argue that Equiano and Cugoano were likely to have encountered Thomas Reid's philosophy. The Scottish School had one of the earliest formulations of natural law that explicitly condemned slavery, and was discussed widely by other English abolitionist movements at the time. Thomas Reid published *An Inquiry Into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* in 1764, over two decades before Equiano's *An Interesting Narrative* in 1789 and Cugoano's *Thoughts and Sentiments* in 1791; thus it follows logically based on the timeline of events that the philosophy of natural law which Equiano and Cugoano encountered was most likely from the Scottish School of Common Sense.

## Results

Thomas Reid argued for natural rights by establishing free, self determined action as a universal Aristotelian "first principle", which all men possess and are desirous of preserving. His philosophy of Common Sense held that all humans share this capacity and desire for self determination, making it a "common" right. It is to this "common sense" first principle that Cugoano appeals in his argument that Africans are not "fitted for" and do not enjoy servitude, as many pro-slavery advocates would argue: "Nevertheless their freedom and rights are as dear to them [the Africans], as those privileges are to other people. And it may be said that freedom, and the liberty of enjoying their own privileges, burns with as much zeal and fervour in the breast of an Aethiopian, as in the breast of any inhabitant on the globe." Equiano likely assisted Cugoano in the publishing of his work, and similarly appeals to Common Sense first principles: "Surely this traffic cannot be good...which violates that first natural right of mankind, equality and independency." He uses literary accommodation, pointing out the similarities between his native African tribe's customs and Jewish ceremonial tradition, an appeal to the Judeo-Christian identity of his readership. He also appeals to their economic sensibility and mercantilist motivations by advocating an increase in trade with a freed and more profitable African continent.

## Conclusion

There is substantial evidence of Reid's common sense principles of natural law within these two works. I cannot say definitively that Reid was their primary influence in understanding natural law, but the evidence, combined with their use of accommodation, makes a convincing case.

## Bibliography (Selected)

- Equiano, Olaudah. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or, Gustavus Vassa, the African*. 1789. Reprint, Broadview Press, 2001.
- Cugoano, Ottobah. *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and wicked traffic of the slavery: and commerce of the human species, humbly submitted to the inhabitants of Great-Britain*. 1787. Reprint, Penguin Classics, Feb 01, 1999.
- Reid, Thomas. *Inquiry and Essays*. Edited by Ronald E. Beanblossom and Keith Lehrer, Hackett Publishing Co., 1983.
- Coffey, John. "The abolition of the slave trade: Christian conscience and political action", *The Cambridge Papers*, June 2006.

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to my Thesis Advisor Dr. Stephanie Carpenter for her oversight of my project and assistance in determining the originality of my work; My secondary advisor, Dr. Gary Wood, for his advice and background in natural law philosophy, and finally my father, Dr. Nicholas Miller, who first introduced me to Thomas Reid's thought.