

Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes

John Woolman

Voices were nevertheless heard in the Enlightenment insisting on the equality of the races. The Quaker John Woolman (1720-1772), a tailor and shopkeeper by trade, was a zealous critic of American slavery. This selection is from a 1762 Philadelphia tract, Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes.

Some who keep slaves, have doubted as to the equity of the practice; but as they knew men, noted for their piety, who were in it, this, they say, has made their minds easy.

To lean on the example of men in doubtful cases, is difficult: for only admit, that those men were not faithful and upright to the highest degree, but that in some particular case they erred, and it may follow that this one case was the same, about which we are in doubt; and to quiet our minds by their example, may be dangerous to ourselves; and continuing in it, prove a stumbling block to tender-minded people who succeed us, in like manner as their examples are to us.

But supposing charity was their only motive, and they not foreseeing the tendency of paying robbers for their booty, were not justly under the imputation of being partners with a thief, Prov. xxix. 24. but were really innocent in what they did, are we assured that we keep them with the same views they kept them? If we keep them from no other motive than a real sense of duty, and true charity governs us in all our proceedings toward them, we are so far safe: but if another spirit, which inclines our minds to the ways of this world, prevail upon us, and we are concerned for our own outward gain more than for their real happiness, it will avail us nothing that some good men have had the care and management of Negroes.

Since mankind spread upon the earth, many have been the revolutions attending the several families, and their customs and ways of life different from each other. This diversity of manners, though some are preferable to others, operates not in favor of any, so far as to justify them to do violence to innocent men; to bring them from their own to another way of life. The mind, when moved by a principle of true love, may feel a warmth of gratitude to the universal father, and a lively sympathy with those nations, where divine Light has been less manifest.

This desire for their real good may beget a willingness to undergo hardships for their sakes, that the true knowledge of God may be spread amongst them:

but to take them from their own land, with views of profit to ourselves, by means inconsistent with pure justice, is foreign to that principle which seeks the happiness of the whole creation. Forced subjection, of innocent persons of full age, is inconsistent with right reason; on one side, the human mind is not naturally fortified with that firmness in wisdom and goodness, necessary to an independent ruler; on the other side, to be subject to the uncontrollable will of a man, liable to err, is most painful and afflicting to a conscientious creature.

It is our happiness faithfully to serve the divine Being, who made us: his perfection makes our service reasonable; but so long as men are biased by narrow self-love, so long an absolute power over other men is unfit for them.

Men, taking on them the government of others, may intend to govern reasonably, and make their subjects more happy than they would be otherwise; but, as absolute command belongs only to him who is perfect, where frail men, in their own wills, assume such command, it hath a direct tendency to vitiate their minds, and make them more unfit for government.

Placing on men the ignominious title SLAVE, dressing them in uncomely garments, keeping them to servile labor, in which they are often dirty, tends gradually to fix a notion in the mind, that they are a sort of people below us in nature, and leads us to consider them as such in all our conclusions about them. And, moreover, a person which in our esteem is mean and contemptible, if their language or behavior toward us is unseemly or disrespectful, it excites wrath more powerfully than the like conduct in one we accounted our equal or superior; and where this happens to be the case, it disqualifies for candid judgment; for it is unfit for a person to sit as judge in a case where his own personal resentments are stirred up; and, as members of society in a well framed government, we are mutually dependent. Present interest incites to duty, and makes each man attentive to the convenience of others; but he whose will is a law to others, and can enforce obedience by punishment; he whose wants are supplied without feeling any obligation to make equal returns to his benefactor, his irregular appetites find an open field for motion, and he is in danger of growing hard, and inattentive to their convenience who labor for his support; and so loses that disposition, in which alone men are fit to govern.

The English government hath been commended by candid foreigners for the disuse of racks and tortures, so much practiced in some states; but this multiplying slaves now leads to it; for where people exact hard labor of others, without a suitable reward, and are resolved to continue in that way, severity to such who oppose them becomes the consequence; and several Negro criminals, among the English in America, have been executed in a lingering, painful way, very terrifying to others.

It is a happy case to set out right, and persevere in the same way: a wrong beginning leads into many difficulties; for to support one evil, another becomes customary; two produces more; and the further men proceed in this way, the greater their dangers, their doubts and fears; and the more painful and perplexing

are their circumstances; so that such who are true friends to the real and lasting interest of our country, and candidly consider the tendency of things, cannot but feel some concern on this account.

There is that superiority in men over the brute creatures, and some of them so manifestly dependent on men for a living, that for them to serve us in moderation, so far as relates to the right use of things, looks consonant to the design of our Creator.

There is nothing in their frame, nothing relative to the propagating their species, which argues the contrary; but in men there is. The frame of men's bodies, and the disposition of their minds are different; some, who are tough and strong, and their minds active, choose ways of life requiring much labor to support them; others are soon weary; and though use makes labor more tolerable, yet some are less apt for toil than others, and their minds less sprightly. These latter laboring for their subsistence, commonly choose a life easy to support, being content with a little. When they are weary they may rest, take the most advantageous part of the day for labor; and in all cases proportion one thing to another, that their bodies be not oppressed.

Now, while each is at liberty, the latter may be as happy, and live as comfortably as the former; but where men of the first sort have the latter under absolute command, not considering the odds in strength and firmness, do, sometimes, in their eager pursuit, lay on burthens grievous to be borne; by degrees grow rigorous, and, aspiring to greatness, they increase oppression, and the true order of kind Providence is subverted.

There are weaknesses sometimes attending us, which make little or no alteration in our countenances, nor much lessen our appetite for food, and yet so affect us, as to make labor very uneasy. In such case masters, intent on putting forward business, and jealous of the sincerity of their slaves, may disbelieve what they say, and grievously afflict them.

Action is necessary for all men, and our exhausting frame requires a support, which is the fruit of action. The earth must be labored to keep us alive: labor is a proper part of our life; to make one answer the other in some useful motion, looks agreeable to the design of our Creator. Motion, rightly managed, tends to our satisfaction, health and support.

Those who quit all useful business, and live wholly on the labor of others, have their exercise to seek; some such use less than their health requires; others choose that which, by the circumstances attending it, proves utterly reverse to true happiness. Thus, while some are divers ways distressed for want of an open channel of useful action, those who support them sigh, and are exhausted in a stream too powerful for nature, spending their days with too little cessation from labor.

Seed sown with the tears of a confined oppressed people, harvest cut down by an overborne discontented reaper, makes bread less sweet to the taste of an honest

man, than that which is the produce, or just reward of such voluntary action, which is one proper part of the business of human creatures.

Again, the weak state of the human species, in bearing and bringing forth their young, and the helpless condition of their young beyond that of other creatures, clearly shew that Perfect Goodness designs a tender care and regard should be exercised toward them; and that no imperfect, arbitrary power should prevent the cordial effects of that sympathy, which is, in the minds of well-met pairs, to each other, and toward their offspring.

In our species the mutual ties of affection are more rational and durable than in others below us; the care and labor of raising our offspring much greater. The satisfaction arising to us in their innocent company, and in their advances from one rational improvement to another, is considerable, when two are thus joined, and their affections sincere. It however happens among slaves, that they are often situate in different places; and their seeing each other depends on the will of men, liable to human passions, and a bias in judgment; who, with views of self-interest, may keep them apart more than is right. Being absent from each other, and often with other company, there is a danger of their affections being alienated, jealousies arising, the happiness otherwise resulting from their offspring frustrated, and the comforts of marriage destroyed.—These things being considered closely, as happening to a near friend, will appear to be hard and painful.

He who reverently observes that goodness manifested by our gracious Creator toward the various species of beings in this world, will see, that in our frame and constitution is clearly shown that innocent men, capable to manage for themselves, were not intended to be slaves....

Through the force of long custom, it appears needful to speak in relation to color.—Suppose a white child, born of parents of the meanest sort, who died and left him an infant, falls into the hands of a person, who endeavors to keep him a slave, some men would account him an unjust man in doing so, who yet appear easy while many black people, of honest lives, and good abilities, are enslaved, in a manner more shocking than the case here supposed. This is owing chiefly to the idea of slavery being connected with the black color, and liberty with the white:—and where false ideas are twisted into our minds, it is with difficulty we get fairly disentangled.

A traveler, in cloudy weather, misseeth his way, makes many turns while he is lost; still forms in his mind, the bearing and situation of places, and though the ideas are wrong, they fix as fast as if they were right. Finding how things are, we see our mistake; yet the force of reason, with repeated observations on places and things, do not soon remove those false notions, so fastened upon us, but it will seem in the imagination as if the annual course of the sun was altered; and though, by recollection, we are assured it is not, yet those ideas do not suddenly leave us.

Selfishness being indulged, clouds the understanding; and where selfish men,

for a long time, proceed on their way, without opposition, the deceivableness of unrighteousness gets so rooted in their intellects, that a candid examination of things relating to self-interest is prevented; and in this circumstance, some who would not agree to make a slave of a person whose color is like their own, appear easy in making slaves of others of a different color, though their understandings and morals are equal to the generality of men of their own color.

The color of a man avails nothing, in matters of right and equity. Consider color in relation to treaties; by such, disputes betwixt nations are sometimes settled. And should the father of us all so dispose things, that treaties with black men should sometimes be necessary, how then would it appear amongst the princes and ambassadors, to insist on the prerogative of the white color?

Whence is it that men, who believe in a righteous omnipotent Being, to whom all nations stand equally related, and are equally accountable, remain so easy in it; but for that the ideas of Negroes and slaves are so interwoven in the mind, that they do not discuss this matter with that candor and freedom of thought, which the case justly calls for?

To come at a right feeling of their condition, requires humble serious thinking; for, in their present situation, they have but little to engage our natural affection in their favor.

Had we a son or a daughter involved in the same case, in which many of them are, it would alarm us, and make us feel their condition without seeking for it. The adversity of an intimate friend will incite our compassion, while others, equally good, in the like trouble, will but little affect us.

Again, the man in worldly honor, whom we consider as our superior, treating us with kindness and generosity, begets a return of gratitude and friendship toward him. We may receive as great benefits from men a degree lower than ourselves, in the common way of reckoning, and feel ourselves less engaged in favor of them. Such is our condition by nature; and these things being narrowly watched and examined, will be found to center in self-love.

The blacks seem far from being our kinsfolks, and did we find an agreeable disposition and sound understanding in some of them, which appeared as a good foundation for a true friendship between us, the disgrace arising from an open friendship with a person of so vile a stock, in the common esteem, would naturally tend to hinder it.—They have neither honors, riches, outward magnificence nor power; their dress coarse, and often ragged; their employ drudgery, and much in the dirt: they have little or nothing at command; but must wait upon and work for others, to obtain the necessaries of life; so that, in their present situation, there is not much to engage the friendship, or move the affection of selfish men: but such who live in the spirit of true charity, to sympathize with the afflicted in the lowest stations of life, is a thing familiar to them.

Such is the kindness of our Creator, that people, applying their minds to sound wisdom, may, in general, with moderate exercise, live comfortably, where

no misapplied power hinders it.—We in these parts have cause gratefully to acknowledge it. But men leaving the true use of things, their lives are less calm, and have less of real happiness in them.

Many are desirous of purchasing and keeping slaves, that they may live in some measure conformable to those customs of the times, which have in them a tincture of luxury; for when we, in the least degree, depart from that use of the creatures, for which the Creator of all things intended them, there luxury begins.

And if we consider this way of life seriously, we shall see there is nothing in it sufficient to induce a wise man to choose it, before a plain, simple way of living. If we examine stately buildings and equipage, delicious food, superfine cloths, silks and linens; if we consider the splendor of choice metal fastened upon raiment, and the most showy inventions of men; it will yet appear that the humble-minded man, who is contented with the true use of houses, food and garments, and cheerfully exerciseth himself agreeable to his station in civil society, to earn them, acts more reasonably, and discovers more soundness of understanding in his conduct, than such who lay heavy burdens on others, to support themselves in a luxurious way of living....

In true gospel simplicity, free from all wrong use of things, a spirit which breathes peace and good will is cherished; but when we aspire after imaginary grandeur, and apply to selfish means to attain our end, this desire, in its original, is the same with the Picts in cutting figures on their bodies; but the evil consequences attending our proceedings are the greatest.

A covetous mind, which seeks opportunity to exalt itself, is a great enemy to true harmony in a country: envy and grudging usually accompany this disposition, and it tends to stir up its likeness in others. And where this disposition ariseth so high, as to embolden us to look upon honest industrious men as our own property during life, and to keep them to hard labor, to support us in those customs which have not their foundation in right reason; or to use any means of oppression; a haughty spirit is cherished on one side, and the desire of revenge frequently on the other, till the inhabitants of the land are ripe for great commotion and trouble; and thus luxury and oppression have the seeds of war and desolation in them.