PART VI Abolition

VARIETY OF OPINION

Equiano would appear to have been one of the abolition lobby's most persistent and convincing speakers.

ADRIAN HASTINGS

The white men . . . say the slave trade [is] bad . . . [Why] did they think it good before?

OSEI BONSU, KING OF ASANTE

[If I] could do without slaves—it would be better for [me]; but . . . that [is] impossible.

EYO HONESTY II, KING OF CREEK TOWN, OLD CALABAR

Any general account which attributes the rise of the antislavery movement to considerations of economic necessity is open to serious objections.

HOWARD TEMPERLEY
The resistance of the slaves unequivocally contributed ... to the fact that the slave system was increasingly seen in Britain to be not only morally wrong and economically inefficient, but also politically unwise.

MICHAEL CRATON

Adrian Hastings

Abolitionists Black and White

The movement to end the slave trade began in Europe, not in Africa, but, as the following piece reminds us, Africans and African Americans played important roles in that movement. British historian Adrian Hastings explains the roles blacks played in the campaign that turned the British from being the Atlantic’s biggest slave traders to being the slave trade’s biggest opponents. Prominent among them was the former captive Olaudah Equiano, whose account of the Middle Passage appears in Part III.

On 19 March 1783 a young Christian Igbo in his late thirties called on Granville Sharp, the anti-slavery agitator, at his London home, to bring to his attention a report of how 130 Africans had been thrown into the sea off a slave-ship for the sake of the insurance money. The Igbo was Olaudah Equiano, and Sharp in consequence began another of his campaigns to bring the perpetrators to justice. He was not successful. It was the first recorded appearance of Equiano upon the public stage.

Captured by African traders from his home village at the age of 10 and sold to British traders, he was carried across the Atlantic, first to Barbados and then to Virginia. Here a British captain took a liking to the boy, bought him, and took him to England, renaming him Gustavus

Vassa. He received some education, sailed in many ships, and acquired a good deal of experience of both the West Indies and North America. He was baptized while still a boy in 1759 and later had an experience of conviction of salvation by faith in Christ alone while on a ship in Cadiz harbour in 1774. His pocket Bible, he could write, “was my only companion and comfort.” In 1779 he had applied to the Bishop of London to be ordained and sent as a missionary to Africa, but this petition was not accepted. In the following years he emerged as a leader of London Africans, a considerable little community, and active in the struggle against slavery. It was as such that he approached Sharp in the spring of 1783.

One of Equiano’s friends, Ottobah Cugoano, a Fanti with the English name of John Stuart, published in 1787 a book entitled Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evils of Slavery. It included the fiercest of denunciations of “abominable, mean, beastly, cruel, bloody slavery carried on by the inhuman, barbarous Europeans against the poor unfortunate Black Africans,” “an injury and robbery contrary to all law, civilization, reason, justice, equity and charity.” Writing in a Protestant country, the author appropriately insisted that “Protestants, as they are called, are the most barbarous slave-holders, there are none can equal the Scottish floggers and negro-drivers, and the barbarous Dutch cruelties.” This book was rapidly translated into French and appeared in Paris the following year.

Equiano and Cugoano were at once the intellectuals and the campaigners within the new African diaspora. It is true that there is some evidence that Cugoano’s book may be the product in part of hands other than his own. One of them, indeed, may have been Equiano’s. Two years later Equiano published a further book of his own which, while still being very much a piece of anti-slavery literature, was more naturally enthralling in being first and foremost an account of his life and adventures, including a quite lengthy description of his African childhood. There is no reason to think that Equiano did not write it. He was clearly a man of remarkable intelligence, versatility, and forcefulness, and his mastery of English is shown by letters surviving in his own hand. The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, as he entitled it, was indeed a very interesting book and it is not surprising that it went into eight British editions in his lifetime and ten posthumously. But Equiano’s considerable contribution to the anti-slavery battle was not confined to his books and discreet interventions with Granville Sharp. He was a campaigner all over Britain, for some years, travelling almost incessantly to speak and sell his book in the principal
Crowded slave deck, 1860. From an actual photograph of the bark Wildfire, captured and brought into Key West, Florida. (Schomberg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library/Art Resource, NY)

towns of the United Kingdom. Thus in 1791 he spent eight and a half months in Ireland, selling 1,900 copies of his narrative and being particularly well received in Belfast. The thought of this Igbo carrying on his campaign for the hearts and minds of the citizens of Birmingham, Manchester, and Sheffield in the late eighteenth century in favour (as he put it in a petition of 1788 addressed to the Queen) of “millions of my fellow African countrymen, who groan under the lash of tyranny” is as impressive as the book itself. Two points may especially be noted. The first is that it was not ineffective. Equiano died before Parliament
declared the trade illegal in 1807 but it only did so because opinion in the country against the trade had steadily hardened, and Equiano would appear to have been one of the abolition lobby's most persistent and convincing public speakers. It is odd that his name does not appear in most accounts of the movement. The second is that Equiano represented at its most articulate a new social reality: a black, Protestant, English-speaking world which had grown up in the course of the eighteenth century on both sides of the Atlantic in the wake of the slave trade. A dozen of its leaders, "Sons of Africa," including Equiano and Cugoano, addressed a special memorial of thanks to Granville Sharp in December 1787. They had all been given, and willingly employed, European names, but it is noticeable that both Equiano and Cugoano chose to stress their African names on the title-pages of their published works, and Cugoano remarked insistently that "Christianity does not require that we should be deprived of our own personal name or the name of our ancestors." They had no problem in using both. . . .

There were at this time far more African Protestants west of the Atlantic than east of it, but it was appropriate that Equiano and Cugoano, the most vocal among them, should be based in London. London, one may well say, was not only the capital of the empire in which most of them lived (including, until the 1780s, the North American colonies), it was just at this point becoming a sort of capital of Africa itself. . . . No European state possessed more forts along the African coast; no nation carried in its ships more African slaves across the Atlantic; nowhere else in the world was there such knowledge or such concern for Africa, a concern demonstrated by the formal establishment in 1787 of the Committee for the abolition of the slave trade. It was essentially a British, and a London-centred movement. . . .

From the late 1780s Protestant Christianity would impinge upon Africa in a new and far more dynamic way. Granville Sharp, the charming, determined, but slightly eccentric protagonist of African freedom in London, was persuaded that it would be a real step forward if some of the black people in London, many of whom were penniless and in trouble, could be resettled on the coast of Africa. The "Black Poor" of London could be transformed into a flourishing, free agricultural community, an example of the way things could be without the slave trade. There was, in Sharp's vision, to be no governor. They would rule themselves according to the ancient Anglo-Saxon principles of the Frankpledge, as understood in eighteenth-century England. The government agreed to ship them out, and a first settlement was made in this "Province of
Freedom” as Sharp liked to describe it, in 1787. The settlers were, for the most part, from among the dregs of London society with seventy white prostitutes thrown in, while the problems even a very well-managed enterprise was bound to encounter were huge. Unsurprisingly, it was not a success. Some of the settlers were quickly re-enslaved; some turned slavers; many died; quarrels with the local inhabitants mounted until in December 1789 a neighbouring ruler burnt the settlement down. Reinforcements, indeed a new start and a governor, were imperative if the whole exercise was not to be dramatically counter-productive: apparent proof of the inability of freed blacks to make good. A Sierra Leone Company was established and new settlers sought. At that point Sharp seems to have received a letter from Cugoano suggesting that there were plenty of suitable blacks in Canada, formerly British servicemen, who would like to go to Sierra Leone and might even pay their way: “They are consisting of Different Macanicks such as Carpenters, Smiths, Masons and farmers, this are the people that we have immediate use for in the Province of freedom.” Cugoano had been visited by Thomas Peters, a millwright, formerly a slave in North Carolina, then a sergeant in the Guides and Pioneers, now settled in Nova Scotia. Sharp met Peters, the director of the Company accepted the plan, and the Treasury agreed to cover the expenses of shipping. Thomas Clarkson, a leading abolitionist and a director of the Company, had a younger brother John, a navy lieutenant, who was willing to superintend the operation and did so very well. Fifteen ships were chartered to carry 1,100 emigrants from Halifax to Sierra Leone. In January 1792 they sailed; six weeks later they arrived in Freetown and the real history of Sierra Leone began...

In 1807, however, a far more important development took place, the passing by the British Parliament of the bill for the abolition of the slave-trade, just twenty years after the Abolition Committee was first constituted in London and Cugoano’s Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery had been published there. It was, despite the delay (in large part due to the counter-effect of the French Revolution and the war), an impressive achievement, going as it did against the undoubted economic interests of Britain and a powerful interested lobby of planters and merchants. It legally placed the interests of public morality above profit and market forces. It was in no way at the time a necessary achievement. It was managed by the combination of an efficient “moderate” leadership, at once religious and political, with a nation-wide public opinion produced by a great deal of campaigning. The sustained parliamentary
spokesmanship of the morally impeccable Tory Wilberforce, personal friend for so many years of the Prime Minister, was invaluable, though the true architects of abolition were Granville Sharp and Thomas Clarkson, not Wilberforce. A cause which in the early 1780s still seemed eccentric was rendered respectable by the underlying support of the two greatest parliamentarians of the age—Pitt and Fox—and by its coherence with the best in contemporary thought, philosophical and religious. It would certainly not have been carried through without very powerful religious convictions at work which, starting from the Quakers, took hold of an exceptionally able group of upper-class Anglican Evangelicals, but it was by no means an inevitable consequence of the Evangelical Movement, and indeed its movers, Sharp and Clarkson, were far from typical Evangelicals. In America Evangelicalism brought no comparable conclusion. In Holland and France religion remained little affected by such concerns. Only in England did things take this course at the start of the nineteenth century, and it seems hard to deny that it was due to the persevering commitment to the abolitionist cause of a quite small group of men whose separate abilities and positions were knitted together to form a lobby of exceptional effectiveness.

Its effects upon Sierra Leone were to be momentous. The Act of Parliament sanctioned the stationing off the West African coast of ships of the Royal Navy charged with the interception of slavers. It was agreed that the cargo should be landed at Freetown, thus giving the tiny colony a new raison d'être. It badly needed one. The Sierra Leone Company's original aim of establishing a thriving settlement on the shores of Africa which would demonstrate by the success of legitimate commerce the economic pointlessness of the trade in slaves had wholly failed. The Company had never made any profits and its resources were exhausted. The British government had needed to subsidize it increasingly heavily just to keep Sierra Leone going at all. The unanticipated circumstances of a long war with France had destroyed any chance of realizing the original commercial aim, but there was, and long remained, only one really profitable trade on the West African coast and that was the slave trade, though a worthwhile timber trade was beginning to develop at this time. Inhabitants of Freetown, black as well as white, often abandoned the town, whose economy was negligible, to set up elsewhere along the coast as profit-making slavers.

From 1 January 1808 Sierra Leone became a Crown Colony, the authority of the Company being taken over by Parliament. It had a mere
2,000 inhabitants, the survivors and offspring of various groups of settlers brought there from Britain, Canada, or the West Indies. Reformers and parliamentarians in England had thought little about the consequences of intercepting slave ships or what to do with their liberated cargo. They will not have imagined how many they soon would be. Certainly the blockade was far from fully effective; indeed the majority of slavers—in southern waters the vast majority—evaded capture, and the total number of slaves reaching the Americas in the first half of the nineteenth century was not so much less than the total number in the second half of the eighteenth. Not until the middle of the century was the trade effectively crippled, and only in 1864 was the last load of a captured ship landed in Freetown. Nevertheless, if many still got through, many were captured, and Sierra Leone was transformed as a result. By 1814 there were 10,000 “recaptives,” Liberated Africans, in the colony, more than three-fifths of the total population. With the ending of the Napoleonic War the trade increased and recaptives reaching Sierra Leone could number 3,000 a year. The original idea that they be apprenticed to existing citizens or enlisted in the army could never work with many of the people arriving, women above all, but the numbers were anyway far too great. Subsidized for years by the British government, most inevitably settled, officially or unofficially, in villages beyond the town.

_Osei Bonsu and Eyo Honesty II_

_African Opponents of Abolition_

British moves to end the slave trade were not immediately welcomed by those Africans who had profited from selling slaves. In 1820, Osei Bonsu, king of the powerful Asante empire behind the Gold Coast, expressed puzzlement to British representative Joseph Dupuis at why Britain had suddenly ceased purchasing slaves, and also justified a king's role in selling

slaves. Thirty years later, King Eyo Honesty II, the most powerful man in the trading communities known to Europeans as Old Calabar, voiced similar views to a Scottish missionary. Fully aware of the horrors of the strong preying on the weak, Eyo argued that the continuation of slavery was unavoidable.

A. Views of Osei Bonsu, 1820

"Now," said the king, after a pause, "I have another palaver, and you must help me to talk it. A long time ago the great king [of England] liked plenty of trade, more than now; then many ships came, and they bought ivory, gold, and slaves; but now he will not let the ships come as before, and the people buy gold and ivory only. This is what I have in my head, so now tell me truly, like a friend, why does the king do so?"

"His majesty's question," I replied, "was connected with a great palaver, which my instructions did not authorise me to discuss. I had nothing to say regarding the slave trade." "I know that too," retorted the king; "because, if my master liked that trade, you would have told me so before. I only want to hear what you think as a friend; this is not like the other palavers." I was confessedly at a loss for an argument that might pass as a satisfactory reason, and the sequel proved that my doubts were not groundless. The king did not deem it plausible, that this obnoxious traffic should have been abolished from motives of humanity alone; neither would he admit that it lessened the number either of domestic or foreign wars.

Taking up one of my observations, he remarked, "the white men who go to council with your master, and pray to the great God for him, do not understand my country, or they would not say the slave trade was bad. But if they think it bad now, why did they think it good before. Is not your law an old law, the same as the Crammo [Muslim] law? Do you not both serve the same God, only you have different fashions and customs? Crammos are strong people in fetsiche, and they say the law is good, because the great God made the book; so they buy slaves, and teach them good things, which they knew not before. This makes every body love the Crammos, and they go every where up and down, and the people give them food when they want it. Then these men come all the way from the great water [the river Niger], and from Manding, and Dagomba, and Killinga; they stop and trade for slaves, and then go
home. If the great king would like to restore this trade, it would be good for the white men and for me too, because Ashantee is a country for war, and the people are strong; so if you talk that palaver for me properly, in the white country, if you go there, I will give you plenty of gold, and I will make you richer than all the white men."

I urged the impossibility of the king's request, promising, however, to record his sentiments faithfully. "Well then," said the king,

you must put down in my master's book all I shall say, and then he will look to it, now he is my friend. And when he sees what is true, he will surely restore that trade. I cannot make war to catch slaves in the bush, like a thief. My ancestors never did so. But if I fight a king, and kill him when he is insolent, then certainly I must have his gold, and his slaves, and the people are mine too. Do not the white kings act like this? Because I hear the old men say, that before I conquered Fantee and killed the Bruffoes and the kings, that white men came in great ships, and fought and killed many people; and then they took the gold and slaves to the white country: and sometimes they fought together. That is all the same as these black countries. The great God and the fetische made war for strong men every where, because then they can pay plenty of gold and proper sacrifice. When I fought Gaman, I did not make war for slaves, but because Dinkera (the king) sent me an arrogant message and killed my people, and refused to pay me gold as his father did. Then my fetische made me strong like my ancestors, and I killed Dinkera, and took his gold, and brought more than 20,000 slaves to Coomassie. Some of these people being bad men, I washed my stool in their blood for the fetische. But then some were good people, and these I sold or gave to my captains; many, moreover, died, because this country does not grow too much corn like Sarem, and what can I do? Unless I kill or sell them, they will grow strong and kill my people. Now you must tell my master that these slaves can work for him, and if he wants 10,000 he can have them. And if he wants fine handsome girls and women to give his captains, I can send him great numbers.

B. Views of Eyo Honesty II, 1850

The king maintained the utmost composure, paid respectful attention while we spoke, and then answered calmly in his own defence. He wished that he could do without slaves—it would be better for him; but, as the country stood, that was impossible. He did not employ men to steal slaves for him; nor would he knowingly buy those which were
stolen. He bought them in the market, at market price, without being able to know how they were procured; and would let no man steal them from him. He admitted that they were obtained in various objectionable ways, and even expatiated on the subject. They came from different countries, and were sold for different reasons—some as prisoners of war, some for debt, some for breaking their country’s laws, and some by great men, who hated them. The king of a town sells whom he dislikes or fears; his wives and children are sold in turn by his successor. A man inveigles his brother’s children to his house, and sells them. The brother says nothing, but watches his opportunity, and sells the children of the other. He admitted that they were kidnapped also; but said that they came from different far countries, of which he knew nothing, and in which they had no other trade. Calabar people did not steal, but only bought, slaves. He concluded by saying, that he had so many, that his new people, if he did not protect them with a strong hand, would be constantly sold away again by the old ones, and reported to him as dead.

Howard Temperley

The Idea of Progress

In the excerpt from Capitalism and Slavery in Part V, Eric Williams argued that major economic changes lay behind Britain’s sudden turning against the slave trade, although he acknowledged the importance of abolitionists, black and white. Howard Temperley assesses the merits of Williams’s thesis and the opposing humanitarian explanation of British abolitionism. The University of East Anglia (U.K.) historian suggests that neither thesis—nor any blending of them—is satisfactory. Instead, he argues, British and American abolitionists gained confidence that moral progress was possible from the sustained economic growth without slavery in their countries.

The problem is easily stated: What was it, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, that made men turn against an institution which, in one form or another, had existed since time immemorial? Why was slavery attacked then? Why not in the seventeenth century, or the sixteenth? Why, indeed, was it attacked at all?

Traditionally, the answers given to this question have taken two forms.

One is to describe how ideas, initially expressed by a handful of thinkers, were taken up, elaborated, added to, and ultimately incorporated into the beliefs of the population at large. This was essentially the approach of Thomas Clarkson, whose History of Abolition (1808) is notable both as the first attempt to provide a comprehensive account of the origins of the antislavery movement and as a model for later writers. In a foldout map which appears at the end of the introductory section of his work he shows how, beginning far back in the sixteenth century as tiny springs and rivulets, each marked with the name of some prominent thinker or statesman, the waters converge to become rivers, eventually "swelling the torrent which swept away the slave-trade." As Clarkson saw it, the victory of the abolitionists represented the triumph of right thinking over error, of the forces of light over the forces of darkness. It had been a long struggle, extending over centuries, but in the end truth had prevailed.

(Left) “Am I Not a Man and a Brother?” Rhode Island Almanac, 1834. (Right) “Am I Not a Sister?” From the cover of The Liberty Almanac for 1851, published by the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society. (Both courtesy Library Company of Philadelphia)
Until a generation ago few historians felt disposed to dissent from this view. Although less overtly Manichean in their approach, they were prepared to accept Clarkson's analysis, at least to the extent that they saw the ideas which eventually came together and energized the anti-slavery crusade as having originated in the distant past, in most cases with identifiable individuals or groups. Few later commentators would have chosen, as Clarkson did, to include Pope Leo X or Queen Elizabeth in their list of precursors, nor would they have cared to invoke, as Clarkson also did, the hand of Providence as a guiding force; but at bottom the processes they described were much the same. This, for example, is the approach adopted in the early chapters of Frank Klingberg's *The Anti-Slavery Movement in England* (1926), and in one form or another it informs the work of most early twentieth century writers and many later writers, a notable recent example being David Brion Davis's *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (1966).

The principle [sic] challenge to this view has come from those historians who have seen the abolition of the slave trade and slavery as having been the result, not of moral, but of economic pressures. The classic statement of this case was Eric Williams's *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944). Williams, it is true, did not entirely discount the influence of moral teaching, to the extent that he saw the abolitionists as a "spearhead." They spoke "a language the masses could understand" and thereby "were successful in raising anti-slavery sentiments almost to the status of a religion in England." In this sense they helped the process along. But at bottom it was the forces of economic rather than moral change that mattered. It was "mercantilism" that created the slave system and "mature capitalism" that destroyed it. He states his case forcefully: "The attack falls into three phases: the attack on the slave trade, the attack on slavery, the attack on the preferential sugar duties. The slave trade was abolished in 1807, slavery in 1833, the sugar preference in 1846. These three events are inseparable."

Leaving aside for the moment the question of whether the evidence will actually support this view, we may simply note that what we have here are two fundamentally contradictory explanations as to why abolition occurred at the time it did. In the one case it is seen as the product of a long process of intellectual inquiry. The antislavery argument that was presented to Parliament and the British public in the 1780s and 1790s was not, and given its complexity could not conceivably have been, the achievement of one group or even of one generation.
Inevitably it was the work of many hands extending back over many
generations. In the same way, the economic explanation is also depend-
ent on the notion of gradual maturation which initially fostered slavery
but ultimately created a conjunction of interests which destroyed it. In
each case abolition is seen as the result of an extended chain of events
which by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had created
a situation in which the slave trade, and later slavery itself, could no
longer be regarded as acceptable.

Comparing these two explanations, it may be noted that in one re-
spect at least the economic view scores over what, for want of a better
term, we may call the intellectual diffusionist account in that it is more
firmly rooted in what are commonly regarded as the major develop-
ments of the period. Much of the plausibility of Williams’s account, in-
deed, derives from the fact that Britain, the first nation to industrialize,
also took the lead in the campaigns to abolish the slave trade and slav-
ery. This is a development which the intellectual diffusionist account
virtually ignores. Moreover, there is something patently unsatisfactory
about any explanation of a historical event, particularly a historical
event as important as the abolition of the slave trade and slavery, which
is based on developments in the realm of ideas and which fails, at least
in any detailed way, to relate those ideas to the actual lives of people
of the period. Most ideas, as we know, have long pedigrees. Often, too,
they are capable of acquiring a momentum of their own and can de-
velop, almost regardless of changes in the material world, according to
an inner logic of their own. But equally plainly ideas are shaped by cir-
cumstance, and the longer the time span the greater the likelihood of
this happening. Thus in accounting for the attack on slavery we need to
know not simply when ideas originated and who first formulated them,
but what is was at a certain point in time that made man choose, out of
all the ideas available, those particular ideas, and furthermore to act on
them. To assume, as the abolitionists frequently did, that their ideas
were right and that virtue requires no explanation is inadequate, since
plainly not everyone agreed with them. We still need to be shown why
what seemed right to the abolitionists—and, more to the point, to an in-
creasingly large proportion of their contemporaries—had not seemed
right to their predecessors.

Yet, if the intellectual diffusionist account has its pitfalls, so also
does the economic explanation, the principal one being that it is ex-
ceedingly difficult to show that the overthrow of either the slave trade or
slavery would actually have influenced the material interests of those who pressed for it, except, in some cases, adversely. So far as the attack on the British slave trade is concerned, as Seymour Drescher has recently argued in *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition* (1977), the whole theory of West Indian decline upon which Williams bases his thesis is without foundation. West Indian decline was the result, rather than the cause, of abolition. Much the same may be said of the abolition of slavery itself, which further accelerated the decline process. As I attempted to show in an appendix to *British Antislavery, 1833–1870* (1972), the attack on West Indian slavery could not have been an attack on monopoly, since before 1833 a large proportion of the West Indian sugar crop was sold on the world market, which determined the price. Rather, it was the abolition of slavery, which reduced production below that necessary to supply British needs, that created a monopoly, thus driving up prices and creating a demand for an end to differential tariffs. Nor is it easy to fall back on the alternative argument, often used in such cases, and say that what mattered were not economic realities but how men perceived them, since in each instance the results that ensued were widely predicted. Plausible though it might appear at first sight, and attractive though it might remain in theory, the truth is that the economic explanation fails to take account of the fact that slavery was itself very much a capitalist institution, that in general it offered a good return on investment, that it provided a plentiful supply of cheap raw materials, and that the usual effect of emancipation was to drive up the price of the products upon which the burgeoning industries of Europe and America depended.

But if neither the economic nor the intellectual diffusionist accounts provide a satisfactory explanation, what alternatives are there? One obvious tactic, of course, is to try to link the two together. The problem here is that simple mixing does nothing to improve the quality of the initial ingredients. If both are defective, the same will inevitable be true of the final mixture. In the present instance, however, there is a special difficulty in that the two accounts are based not only on different but largely on diametrically opposing views of human nature. The intellectual diffusionists, in their explanation, place a high premium on disinterested benevolence and on the instinctive desire of those who were not themselves victims of, or indeed in any way implicated in, the practice of slaveholding to alleviate the sufferings of others. Williams, for his part, does not entirely discount this element. The abolitionists were
“a brilliant band” and they, or at all events some of them, were genuine idealists. Nevertheless, their role has been “seriously misunderstood and grossly exaggerated,” for what really destroyed the slave system was not altruism but greed, self-interest, and the lust for power—in other words, the same motives which had built it up in the first place. So unless we suppose, as Williams does, that there were two quite separate groups involved, it is hard to see how the two views can be reconciled. That there were two groups is a theoretical possibility, but this is a view which, on the basis of the available evidence, it has so far proved impossible to substantiate, and in any case it is hard to see where the profit motive lay.

One possible way of getting out of this impasse, however, is to look again at the conceptual framework which historians have used. And here we may begin by noting that there is something essentially artificial about the way in which altruism and self-interest have been juxtaposed, as if they were the only motives from which the participants acted. Williams is plainly guilty of this, but so also are the traditionalists in their emphasis on those elements of right thinking and self-dedication which led W. E. H. Lecky in his History of European Morals (1884) to describe the crusade against slavery as “among the three or four perfectly virtuous pages comprised in the history of nations.” Large numbers of people, and certainly groups as large and variegated as those responsible for the overthrow of the slave trade and slavery, which of course included not only the abolitionists but all those who voted against these practices in Parliament and Congress, together with those who supported them in their efforts, are simply not moved, or at least not entirely moved, by abstract. Nor, for that matter, is economics, Adam Smith notwithstanding, merely the pursuit of individual self-interest. Adam Smith himself, significantly enough, disapproved of slavery for reasons which turn out on examination to have nothing to do with its immediate cost-effectiveness. Thus even in his system, and no less strikingly in those of his successors, economics in this broader sense is seen as being concerned not merely, or even primarily, with how best to pursue short-term individual gains, but with the way in which societies actually do, or in theory should, order their affairs. Viewed in this way economics and benevolence no longer appear as opposing principles. As the Victorians in particular were well aware, the two could not only be reconciled but were often mutually supportive. Thus, whether we look at economic thought or at the possible range of motives which led large numbers of
individuals, the great majority of whom were not abolitionists in the narrow sense, to turn against the slave trade and slavery, we find ourselves dealing with large-scale, and in many respects overlapping, systems of belief which are far too complex to be categorized in terms of either self-interest or benevolence.

To call these systems ideologies is, perhaps, to invite misunderstanding, although it is not clear what other word will suffice. Certainly it is not intended here to postulate a rigid set of assumptions which everyone opposed to slavery shared. Perhaps the word could be used in that sense with regard to some antislavery groups which expected a strict orthodoxy of belief on the part of their members, although even then there are distinctions that would need to be recognized. But if we take ideology to mean an assortment of beliefs and values shared by the members of a society and used by them to explain and guide social action, no such rigidity need be assumed. Such an ideology would be expected to change along with the society that produced it, and whose aspirations and beliefs it reflected. Nor should we expect that it would be logically consistent. Much of the impulse for change would come, in fact, from attempts to reconcile internal contradiction. Not surprisingly, many within the society would claim that their beliefs were not simply personal, or for that matter social, but represented universal truths. But whether they did or not is a question which might appropriately be left to philosophers or theologians; for present purposes they should be regarded as social products.

So how might such a concept be used to explain the development of the antislavery movement? One way to begin is to examine the character of the two societies, Britain and the northern United States, which found themselves in the forefront of the struggle. And here we may start by noting that both had experienced remarkable rates of economic growth in the course of the eighteenth century. Probably nowhere else in the world was the relative increase in wealth and population more striking than in the thirteen colonies. This, as we all know, was one of the factors which persuaded the British government to attempt to tighten its hold on the colonists, and so helped to precipitate the break with the mother country. Yet Britain's own rate of growth during these years, although less marked in relative terms, was also impressive, whether we compare it with what had happened in previous centuries or with the experiences of her political rivals. This was, as economic
historians continually remind us, a period of crucial importance for the Western world. Instead of the rhythmic expansion and contraction of populations and their products which had taken place over the previous millennium, the gains of the eighteenth century represented the departure point from which began the sustained growth that has characterized the modern world. Britain and her ex-colonies were in the forefront of this development. Materially speaking, they had reason to feel proud of their achievement.

A second characteristic that Britain and the northern states (as opposed to the South) shared was the fact that they had achieved this prosperity without direct recourse to slave labor, at least on any significant scale. To be sure, there was slavery in Britain right up to the end of the eighteenth century (the Somerset decision notwithstanding), and it lingered on in the northern states even longer. As late as 1820 there were still eighteen thousand slaves in the northeastern United States, and at the time of the first census in 1790 the figure was more than double that; but compared with the situation south of the Mason-Dixon line this represented a relatively modest stake in the institution. It must also be remembered that both Britain and the northern states had profited, and were continuing to profit on an ever-increasing scale, from the employment of slaves elsewhere. Nevertheless, the fact remains that, so far as their domestic arrangements were concerned, both were committed to an essentially free-labor system.

These points are too obvious to dwell on. Yet they are worth emphasizing if only because they help to explain why men in these two societies were so ready to accept ideas of progress, and in particular ideas of progress which linked individual freedom to material prosperity. The two, needless to say, are not necessarily connected. More often than not they have been seen as opposing principles, the assumption being that the pursuit of the one must necessarily entail the sacrifice of the other. Implicit in the whole idea of government is the belief that individual freedom must be given up to secure the benefits of an ordered society, among which must be included a measure of material satisfaction. How much freedom needs to be sacrificed is a matter of opinion, but history is not wanting in examples of societies welcoming tyrants because the alternatives of anarchy and lawlessness were regarded as even less acceptable. So the commonly expressed eighteenth century view that freedom and prosperity were not only reconcilable but mutually supportive, and that the more you had of the one the more you could
expect of the other, is something that needs explaining. The explanation, I suggest, is to be found not in the ideas of the philosophers, still less in theories about the general progress of the human mind, but in the immediate lives of people of the period.

This, then, is one way of relating material and intellectual developments, and one that throws a good deal of light on the thinking of such figures as Adam Smith and the exponents of the secular antislavery argument generally. For what is striking about the secular case against slavery is the assumption that slavery was an economic anachronism. Smith’s own attitudes are particularly revealing, because of all eighteenth century commentators he was probably the one best qualified to argue the case against it on strictly economic grounds. Yet, as already noted, the case he actually presents is not based on economics at all, at least not in any cost-accounting sense, but on the general proposition that greater freedom would lead to greater prosperity. Like other eighteenth century thinkers he expresses himself in terms of universal principles, but at bottom it is a historical argument, derived from his own beliefs about the nature of the historical process. Whatever the objective truths of Smith’s arguments, the fact remains that they are very much the product of one kind of society, and indeed of one particular class within that society.

An obvious objection to this argument is that, while it may very well be true that Adam Smith rejected slavery for the reasons suggested, it is by no means clear that other people did. Very few, after all, were Smithians. The point that is being made here, however, is not that Smith was important for his teachings (although Clarkson was happy to cite him) so much as for what he reflected about the continuing processes that characterized the age in which he lived. Of course, not even Smith himself realized that the Western world was entering a new economic era. Nevertheless, it is evident that substantial increases in trade and improvements in agriculture had begun to be made long before Smith’s time and so were readily observable by his contemporaries. Furthermore, if what is at issue here is the origin of the Western idea of progress, it should be borne in mind that this owed at least as much to developments in the field of knowledge as to material changes. Certainly by the end of the seventeenth century men not only knew more than their predecessors but knew that they knew more.

Yet even if we grant that these developments go some way toward explaining the secular case against slavery, it by no means follows that
they motivated the early leaders of the antislavery movement, most of whom, if we may judge by the arguments they used, believed that they were acting out of religious principles. This is a tricky problem because by and large these principles stem directly from the Christian tradition. But if, instead of following the Clarkson method of attempting to trace them back to their origins, we ask simply what it was that brought them to the fore at this particular point in time, we can perhaps make a start by observing that what was fundamental to the whole attack on slavery was the belief that it was removable. Politics, we are continually reminded, is the art of the practical, but so also are ethics practical in the sense that what is irremovable may be deplorable, inconvenient, or embarrassing, but can scarcely be unethical. Ethics, in other words, implies optionality. Moralists may be more stringent in their views than politicians, but in this respect at least the underlying considerations are the same.

In a sense, of course, slavery always was removable to the extent that institutions men establish they can, given an adequate stimulus, usually get around to disestablishing. But until the eighteenth century that stimulus was generally lacking, with the result that slavery was accepted with that fatalism which men commonly reserve for aspects of nature which, whether they are to be celebrated or deplored, have to be borne. To argue against slavery was to argue against the facts of life. Before slavery could become a political issue—or even, in the proper sense, a moral issue—what needed to be shown was that the world could get along without it. And what better demonstration could there be than the development, within the heartland of Western civilization, of societies which not only did without slavery but which did very well without it, and which furthermore appeared to owe their quite remarkable dynamism to the acceptance of principles which represented the direct negation of the assumptions upon which slavery was founded.

This was not, of course, a development particularly likely to impress the inhabitants of those societies which relied directly on slave labor. They knew perfectly well how much they owed to their slaves, not only in a strictly economic sense, but for the maintenance of their whole way of life. They also knew that they were contributing in no small way to the prosperity of the free-labor societies by providing them with cheap raw materials and foodstuffs. And, by virtue of their position,
they were well placed to judge the revolutionary nature of the abolitionists' demands—what a rapid shift from slave to free labor would mean in terms of political and social power. Often what they said in this regard was a great deal more realistic than anything said by their opponents. Yet the fact remains that as societies they were overshadowed by cultures whose values, deriving from a quite different set of historical experiences, were in the process of changing in ways that made the justification of slavery, even on hardheaded economic grounds, increasingly difficult.

What I am suggesting, in other words, is that the attack on slavery can be seen as an attempt by a dominant metropolitan ideology to impose its values on the societies of the economic periphery. And what I am also suggesting is that this attack was the product of a widening ideological gap occasioned by the extraordinary success, not least in material terms, of those societies which practiced a free-labor system, among which Britain and the northern United States were outstanding examples. For if we suppose that the manner in which societies gain their existence helps to form the ideas of their members as to how people in general should live, we must also, I think, concede that there were very powerful reasons why men in these two societies (and one could add France as a third) should have come to regard slavery as not only immoral but anachronistic.

This, of course, is a very different thing from saying that the promotion of their own economic interest required the abolition of slavery, because in most cases it did not. Nor is it necessary to argue that relative to the slaveholding societies the free-labor societies were becoming more powerful, although sometimes this was so. It was much easier for Britain to attack slavery after the departure of the American colonies. But by the same token it became correspondingly more perilous for the Americans themselves to do anything about it, and in the event little was done to remove the institution until war made action possible. Thus any general account which attributes the rise of the antislavery movement to considerations of economic necessity is open to serious objections.