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Standpoint epistemology, internal critique, and the characterization of Equiano as an Enlightenment thinker

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ABSTRACT

This article shows that Olaudah Equiano's struggles to escape from the condition of enslavement allowed him to attain a privileged epistemic position in relation to certain domains of knowledge. Equiano utilized this privileged epistemic vantage point to launch an internal critique of some strands of Enlightenment philosophy. In the process of launching this internal critique, Equiano also undermined a claim to ownership that was implicitly made by prominent defenders of both slavery and theories of racial superiority in relation to the normative principles which constituted the core of the Enlightenment as an intellectual movement. This article shows that to think of Enlightenment discourse in terms of the trope of the "master's tools" is to misunderstand what Equiano brought about by way of successful internal critique in his *Interesting Narrative*.

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Introduction

Olaudah Equiano was born around the mid-eighteenth century in what is today South-eastern Nigeria. As a child he was captured by slave raiders who forced him to endure the Middle Passage before arriving in the Caribbean. In 1766 Equiano was able to purchase his freedom. Equiano's life is remarkable for a variety of reasons. First, he was a firsthand witness to some of the pivotal events of the eighteenth century. For example, he participated in the Battle of Louisburg (1758) which turned the tide of the Seven Years' War.¹ Accordingly his writings enable us to understand how enslaved people experienced some of the important moments in early modern Atlantic history. Second, he became one of the most important Black voices in the abolitionist movement in eighteenth century England and beyond. Equiano's most important text, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, was published in April of 1789, three months before the French Revolution, and was one of the most important works of abolitionist writing.² It was also popular during his lifetime, going through nine editions that were read by a large audience.³ Equiano died in 1797, long before the abolition of African slavery anywhere in the Americas. Interest in Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* declined in the aftermath of abolition.⁴ This decline in interest is also connected to the rise of race science which became increasingly popular in the nineteenth century,

leading many people to reject the universalism of eighteenth-century abolitionist discourse.⁵

The scholarly reception of the *Interesting Narrative* has mostly focused on the literary significance of the text and its function in the formation of a Black British literary canon, as well as its utility as a source for social history. How the *Interesting Narrative* relates to explicitly philosophical eighteenth-century texts has mostly been neglected. Furthermore a significant portion of the scholarship on Equiano is concerned with questions about his origin.⁶ Vincent Carretta's argument that there is evidence that casts doubt on Equiano's claim to have been born in Igboland and to have experienced the Middle Passage has led to much debate and counterclaims, including discussions about whether Equiano's significance depends on the authenticity of his narrative.⁷ While these debates are important and must be acknowledged, my argument focuses on different aspects of Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*.

The main contention of this article is that Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* can be read through the theoretical lens of standpoint epistemology and the concept of internal critique. I will establish that Equiano's struggles to escape from the condition of enslavement allowed him to attain a privileged epistemic position in relation to certain domains of knowledge. Equiano utilized this privileged epistemic vantage point to launch an internal critique of some strands of Enlightenment philosophy or intellectual discourse which were adhered to by his audience. To understand Equiano's argumentative strategy, we must recognize that the Enlightenment as an intellectual movement in the eighteenth century was not a monolithic movement. Equiano was able to draw on some of the more radical strands of Enlightenment philosophical discourse to argue that it is simply not possible to consistently adhere to the normative principles which constitute the core of Enlightenment thinking, centered on the autonomy of reason, while recognizing slavery as normatively justified.⁸ I show that Equiano can be situated in the strand of Enlightenment philosophy which has been described by some scholars as the radical strand of Enlightenment philosophy.⁹ Nonetheless, it is clear that while Equiano had much in common with philosophers from this radical strand of Enlightenment philosophy, he did not share all of their views. Specifically, he did not share their rejection of religion and their endorsement of an atheistic materialist monism.¹⁰ Stefan M. Wheelock in his important study of Black Atlantic thinkers notes that many scholars of the Enlightenment such as Jonathan Israel assign "early black thinkers virtually no place in the sweeping accounts of the intellectual currencies that gave rise to revolution-era political thought on freedom, democracy, and civilization."¹¹ Wheelock attempts to remedy this neglect through situating thinkers like Equiano in the context of a "black prophetic" intellectual tradition. This article also seeks to remedy the neglect which Wheelock has identified, but whereas he almost exclusively focuses on Equiano's religious discourse, I will show that Equiano also shared some of the positions associated with radical Enlightenment figures such as Denis Diderot.

I do not discount the religious element in Equiano's thought, especially the clear emphasis on Calvinist doctrines, but I illustrate the significant extent to which Equiano participated in discourse associated with the radical strand of the Enlightenment. Along with providing novel insights about Equiano's thought, this emphasis raises interesting questions about the precise meaning of the adjective "radical" when used to modify the Enlightenment by Israel. For example, one might ask if the radicality in

question is supposed to pick out materialist monism as a metaphysical view, or is it supposed to pick out radical abolitionist political and social stances, or is it supposed to refer to an assumed relation of logical entailment between the two. Equiano's case suggests that the link between metaphysical views and social and political views is not as strong as Israel has argued.¹² Moreover, the fact that Equiano expresses very clear Protestant views does not mean that there is no significant overlap between his philosophical orientation and the orientation of some of the most prominent figures associated with the radical Enlightenment. Diderot, for example, despite being an atheist materialist, attributed to Protestantism an important role in bringing about the "love of freedom" which, in his opinion, characterized English political life.¹³ These questions illustrate how reflecting carefully on the contributions of Black thinkers can lead us to examine some presuppositions of the intellectual history of the Enlightenment more generally.

Hegel's concept of internal or immanent critique can help us make sense of how Equiano situates himself vis-à-vis the different strands of Enlightenment philosophical discourse. Scholars have utilized Hegel's master-slave dialectic to study slave narratives and the nature of resistance to slavery.¹⁴ Scholars have also juxtaposed Hegel's master-slave dialectic to slave narratives in order to argue for the inadequacy of Hegel's account of the master-slave relation.¹⁵ Surprisingly, however, no scholar has used Hegel's concept of internal or immanent critique to understand the argumentative structure of slave narratives. I will demonstrate that such an approach to the *Interesting Narrative* allows us to elucidate Equiano's argumentative strategy. In making this argument, I will also shine light on the philosophical elements in the *Interesting Narrative*, a book that most scholars approach as a literary text, not as a work of philosophy.¹⁶ In fact, some scholars, such as Frank Kelleter, have suggested that Equiano's text "must be situated within the framework of *enlightened discourse*."¹⁷ Nevertheless, even Kelleter focuses almost exclusively on the formal literary elements of Equiano's text. This article, by contrast, draws attention to the philosophical argumentative structure of the *Interesting Narrative* which has been overlooked by scholars who are concerned solely with the literary elements of the text. An approach that emphasizes the philosophical elements in the *Interesting Narrative* reveals elements of the text that have been hitherto undetected by more traditional historical and literary approaches.

While the Hegelian concept of internal critique provides a useful tool for understanding Equiano's argumentative strategy, he, of course was not directly influenced by Hegel who was not born until 1770.¹⁸ Equiano did not need Hegel to understand what internal critique is and why it is powerful.¹⁹ This is evidenced by Equiano's response to Raymund Harris, a pro-slavery advocate, to whom he wrote that "as you are so strenuous in bringing in the blessed and benevolent Apostle, Paul, to support your insinuations, with respect to Slavery, I will here attack you on the Apostle's ground."²⁰ Here Equiano shows that he clearly understands the power of internal critique which would enable him to circumvent debates about the adequacy of the criterion, or the set of criteria, that is used to establish the standard for successful justification. In this case, the criterion is the authority ascribed to St. Paul.

In the process of launching his internal critique, Equiano also undermines a claim to ownership that was implicitly made by some defenders of slavery and theories of racial superiority in relation to the normative principles which constituted the core of the Enlightenment as an intellectual movement. Equiano's successful refutation of the

claim to ownership against those who defended the concept of racial superiority, over the normative principles which constituted the core of the Enlightenment has not been adequately accounted for in the secondary literature on Equiano. Instead, most scholars continue to argue that Equiano employed “the master’s tools” to challenge the right of white people to oppress and enslave Black Africans.²¹

To think of Enlightenment discourses in terms of the trope of the “master’s tools” is to misunderstand what Equiano brought about by way of internal critique in his *Interesting Narrative*. A successful internal critique of a claim or set of claims shows that one’s opponent does not in fact uphold the standards of justification to which he purports to adhere. In other words, it shows that the opponent does not understand what is entailed by the principles that he upholds. As a result, a successful internal critique would show that, despite the master’s profession of claims to ownership and proficiency in the use of certain tools, the “master’s tools” do not belong to the master after all. Equiano also constantly appeals to his own experience in his *Interesting Narrative*. Thus, any account of the argumentative structure of his *Interesting Narrative* has to take into consideration his appeals to experience. In the following section, I show how Equiano explicitly articulates a connection between social experience and knowledge in a way that can be captured using the concept of standpoint epistemology. I then demonstrate how his standpoint, as a formerly enslaved subject, is deployed by him to undertake an internal critique of his pro-slavery opponents.

Standpoint epistemology and Equiano’s self-representation as an epistemic subject

Equiano was conscious of the way in which his experiences as an enslaved subject allowed him to attain a privileged epistemic vantage point. In chapter X of his *Interesting Narrative* Equiano describes an incident that took place in the spring of 1774, when he was planning on sailing to the Ottoman Empire and ending his days there. Equiano had secured a job for his friend, John Annis, on the ship that he planned to sail on. Annis, like Equiano, had managed to achieve freedom from slavery. Equiano tells us that Annis’s former enslaver kidnapped Annis from on board the ship, and that the captain of the ship did not intervene to protect Annis.²² Only Equiano attempted to save Annis, failing, however, in his attempt. Equiano’s self-representation of his motivations in attempting to save Annis is quite striking, he writes that he “proved the only friend he had, who attempted to regain him his liberty, if possible, having known the want of liberty myself.”²³ Equiano does not emphasize friendship as the primary motivation for his attempt to save Annis. Nor does he emphasize the fact they are both Black men. Instead, Equiano claims that he was motivated by an axiological judgement regarding liberty. Accordingly, Equiano presented himself to readers as deciding to help others because of his knowledge of the value of freedom for a dignified human life. Furthermore, Equiano implies that this knowledge was something he had attained during his struggle for freedom, and that those who did not have to fight for freedom in the face of slavery might find it more difficult to attain this knowledge. Read this way, we can view Equiano as presenting himself as someone who, due to his struggles against slavery, had managed to attain a privileged epistemic position in relation to certain domains of knowledge, in this case in relation to the axiology of freedom.

Equiano presents himself as an epistemic subject whose situation can be analyzed by using the framework of standpoint epistemology. Moreover, because he consciously implies the existence of a systematic causal relationship between his struggles against slavery and his privileged epistemic vantage point in relation to certain domains of knowledge, he can be viewed as having formulated a version of standpoint epistemology. Thus, there is a reflexive element insofar as Equiano also knows that this privileged epistemic standpoint is the product of his struggles to free himself from slavery.²⁴ In the words of Sandra Harding, the basic insight of standpoint epistemology is that “one’s social situation enables and sets limits on what one can know” and that some social situations are more limiting than others with respect to certain domains of knowledge.²⁵ Equiano’s self-presentation as an epistemic subject fits neatly within this framework.

In the context of North American analytic philosophy, Nancy C. M. Hartsock is usually credited with providing one of the first explicit accounts of standpoint epistemology. Hartsock’s key insight is that “like the lives of proletarians according to Marxian theory, women’s lives make available a particular and privileged vantage point on male supremacy, a vantage point which can ground a powerful critique of the phallographic institutions and ideology which constitute the capitalist form of patriarchy.”²⁶ Hartsock emphasizes that this privileged epistemic standpoint is achieved as a result of collective struggle; it is not merely given as a result of one’s social position.²⁷ The essential point is that the proponents of standpoint epistemology advance the thesis that in order to survive in social environments where one is oppressed, one must understand the systematic mechanisms that sustain oppression, and this involves understanding both the world of the oppressed and the world of the oppressor in a way that is not mirrored by the oppressor.

Patricia Hill Collins has also formulated a version of standpoint epistemology that draws on the experiences of African American women. She claims that “African-American women may occupy material positions that stimulate a unique [epistemic] vantage point.”²⁸ However, she does not refer to her own theory as a version of standpoint epistemology. As she understands it, “one implication of standpoint approaches is that the more subordinate the group, the purer the vision of the oppressed group.”²⁹ However, this is an uncharitable account of standpoint epistemology insofar as it does not consider the various qualifications which attend the formulation of standpoint epistemology. In particular, the crux of the matter is not that oppression produces privileged epistemic vantage points in relation to certain domains of knowledge. Instead, it is the systematic struggle against oppression that produces privileged epistemic vantage points in relation to certain domains of knowledge. The emphasis on the dynamic element also allows us to clarify that a standpoint does not refer to an essentialist social category, but rather to a reflexively grasped trajectory. One may think that we can point to counterexamples such as Jacobus Elisa Johannes Capitein who defended the thesis that “evangelical freedom” is compatible with legal enslavement.³⁰ However, what this shows is that there is no direct automatic connection between enslavement and the kind of epistemic gains that are posited by standpoint theory.³¹ Such a direct connection, absent the mediation of systematic struggle, is not posited by standpoint theory, however.

Gloria Chuku has argued, in relation to Equiano, that “the same society that repressed him also offered him the very tools and skills with which he resisted oppression.”³² To Chuku’s correct claim can be added that Equiano’s social position, dynamically

understood, led him to develop a greater mastery over those tools than was possessed by whites within that society. Without using the terms “standpoint epistemology,” scholars such as Maria Del Mar Gallego have also hinted at the possibility of using the framework of standpoint epistemology in order to understand the argumentative structure of Equiano’s narrative. According to Del Mar Gallego, Equiano is “forced to adopt the value system upheld by this readership, but he retains a double identity as outsider-insider which allows him to know things that his audience might not be best placed to know.”³³ Unlike Del Mar Gallego, I emphasize that Equiano’s argumentative strategy, when it is successful, undermines the claim to ownership over the values of the Enlightenment that many members of his audience might have advanced either implicitly or explicitly. Equiano’s argumentative strategy, when it is successful, undermines the scholarly tendency to conflate between Enlightenment ideals and European ideals. While it may be accurate to claim that Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* begins with the use of the “master’s tools,” at the end of the narrated process of development, the master’s claim to ownership over those tools has been implicitly undermined. This happens because Equiano can show that he has a better grasp of what is entailed by the core tenets and standards of justification of Enlightenment philosophy than his opponents. My contention is that ownership is not conferred upon the group of people who first invoke a set of principles and standards of justifications, but rather it is conferred upon those who know best how to use them, and who grasp what they entail.

Equiano understood that he had to assert his humanity throughout the *Interesting Narrative* because race-based slavery was built upon the dehumanization of Africans.³⁴ He uses this recognition of the causal relationship between his struggles to free himself from enslavement and his status as an epistemic subject who has a privileged vantage point in relation to some domains of knowledge, to assert his humanity. This self-representation as a capable epistemic agent is also associated with the manner in which he undermines claims to knowledge that were advanced by proponents of racist theories and justifiers of slavery.³⁵ Equiano demonstrates that he is aware of the ideological nature of the racist discourse which was used by defenders of slavery. Equiano argues that the manner in which Europeans attempt to explain “the apparent inferiority of an African” by referring to an innate cognitive deficiency that is associated with skin color, is ideological.³⁶ In this context, a claim is said to be ideological insofar as it is so obviously false when assessed relative to the evidence that was available to the people who make it, that the only way in which we can understand why people made this claim is to point to the claim’s role in serving to justify the enslavement of Black Africans.³⁷

Equiano refers to an “apparent inferiority,” thus he does not explicitly endorse the claim that Africans are inferior in any essential or biological way in comparison to Europeans. At first glance, it seems that Equiano is attempting to reject racist theories that are based on biology and physiology, while also seemingly endorsing theories which justify subjugation by referring to claims about cultural inferiority.³⁸ For example, Equiano states that “I no longer looked upon them [Europeans] as spirits, but as men superior to us; and therefore I had the strongest desire to resemble them.”³⁹ In the course of criticizing theories of innate inferiority, he asks the following rhetorical questions “But, above all, what advantages do not a refined people possess over those who are rude and uncultivated? Let the polished and haughty European recollect that *his* ancestors were once, like the Africans, uncivilized, and even barbarous. Did Nature

make *them* inferior to their sons? And should *they too* have been made slaves? Every rational mind answers, No."⁴⁰ By "inferior" he means to refer to some kind of innate deficiency that would serve to justify subjugation or enslavement. In turn, Equiano uses "superior" to refer to the possession of properties that are worthy of emulation, but that do not justify mastery over another people. In other words, Equiano is arguing that even if we accept that Western civilization, a concept which will be subjected to interrogation below, is superior in the aforementioned sense, it does not follow that this civilizational superiority can be employed to justify the enslavement or subjugation of another group of human beings. Equiano is arguing that the moral worth of a people is independent of their civilizational attainments. Hence, while he accepts the claim that there are some aspects in which Western civilization is superior, he does not accept the claim that this superiority can be used to justify the enslavement and subjugation of other peoples.

Thus, for Equiano, it is culture and not race which accounts for human differences. Moreover, Equiano does not think that what makes Europeans superior is something that cannot be acquired by others. He clearly thought that he himself could partake in the kind of discourse and practices to which he ascribed European superiority. For example, he presents himself as having acquired a better understanding of Christianity than many Christians who live in the Anglophone Atlantic world. In fact, he addresses Christian defenders of slavery as "nominal Christians!" and he asks them, "learned you this from your God? Who says unto you, Do unto all men as you would men should do unto you?"⁴¹ Equiano also does not simply accept all the claims that were made by Europeans, and he does not accept the self-representation of Europeans. Here Equiano is implicitly making an important conceptual distinction between who introduced a certain kind of discourse and who controls the directions in which that discourse develops.

While Equiano seems to acquiesce to the claim that European civilization was in some sense superior, he was clearly aware of eighteenth-century debates on West Africa, and he provides an account of his homeland that undermines the claims that were used to justify the slave trade. For example, as George E. Boulukos notes, in emphasizing that his people's "subjection to the king of Benin was little more than nominal,"⁴² Equiano was directly responding to the arguments that were made by people such as Robert Norris. Norris claimed that Africans had already consented to be slaves to their kings, and that they thereby consented to the possibility of being sold as chattel simply by consenting to the rule of their allegedly despotic kings.⁴³

The most remarkable aspect of Equiano's description of his homeland, however, was his refusal to accept the abolitionist trope that Africans were innocent and primitive savages which appeared in major works such as John Atkins's *Voyage to Guinea, Brazil, and the West Indies* (1735) and *Some Historical Account of Guinea* (1771) by Anthony Benezet. Equiano demonstrates his epistemic autonomy, even as he is forced to rely on European travel accounts in order to buttress his claims, by refusing to follow, in the words of Boulukos, "their reductive treatment of all Africans as happy primitives."⁴⁴

In refusing to depict Africans as happy primitives, or as one people without social and cultural differentiation, Equiano came independently to a similar position to that held by Diderot, a key proponent of the radical Enlightenment.⁴⁵ Accordingly Equiano can be viewed as embracing some strands of Enlightenment discourse while criticizing other

strands such as polygenist arguments for the justification of slavery. Furthermore, Equiano identified the concept of a noble savage as a fundamentally dehumanizing concept. As Sankar Muthu notes, the natural rights theorists and social contract theorists “celebrated Amerindians as noble savages, categorized Amerindians as the most purely human of humans, while also according them the weakest possible (and sometimes a nonexistent) moral status in the face of European imperial power.”⁴⁶ For after all, if so-called noble savages completely lack artifice or culture, then in what sense can one speak of them as human beings.

From the beginning of the sixteenth century when Amerigo Vespucci penned his description of Amerindians in his *Mundus Novus* (1503) as living “according to nature ... without art or order”⁴⁷ through to Rousseau’s utilization of the peoples of the Western Hemisphere in order to demonstrate the underdeveloped mental abilities of humanity in its natural state, we can trace the outline of a theoretical framework that de-humanizes its subjects regardless of the observer’s intentions.⁴⁸ Much abolitionist rhetoric existed within this theoretical framework. For example, Benezet describes West Africans as retaining “a great deal of innocent simplicity.”⁴⁹ Viewed in this context, Equiano’s refusal to depict the Igbo in this manner becomes even more remarkable. So too is his decision to adopt a position that is similar to that of Diderot who held that no society can live by the light of nature alone and that artifice and invention are a constitutive aspect of human nature, and hence there can be no such thing as humans who live in a state of nature.⁵⁰ Equiano also used Biblical references to underscore Igbo humanity, stating, for example, that the “strong analogy which even by this sketch, imperfect as it is, appears to prevail in the manners and customs of my countrymen, and those of the Jews, before they reached the Land of Promise, and particularly the patriarchs, while they were yet in that pastoral state which is described in Genesis.”⁵¹ Thus, like the Jews in Genesis who existed in a “pastoral state,” the Igbo might live in a primitive stage of development from the perspective of Enlightenment philosophers, but this was not a state of nature. Elsewhere Equiano describes Igbo society as possessing a complex economic structure and social division of labor when he writes that “we had priests and magicians, or wise men.”⁵² This implies the existence of a division of labor that allowed for the distribution of the surplus that was created by the direct producers to maintain those whose professions were not directly tied to agriculture. Equiano also describes the existence of a social hierarchy when he notes that his father was one of “the chief men” who acted as judges.⁵³ Thus, Equiano, in one of the earliest Anglophone defenses of an African social order by an African,⁵⁴ consciously refuses to adhere to the description of West African societies as existing outside of history in a primitive state of nature. This is particularly notable in light of the fact that many abolitionists shared these denigrating views of African society.

While Equiano refuses to depict Africans as innocent noble savages, he does not extend the same consideration to indigenous people who he encountered in the Americas. For example, Equiano’s description of the Miskitos of Caribbean Central America, who he met while working on a plantation owned by Dr. Charles Irving, is negative and potentially at odds with his other anti-racist arguments. Of the Miskitos, Equiano writes, “I never met any nation that were so simple in their manners as these people, or had so little ornament in their houses. Neither had they, as I ever could learn, one word expressive of an oath.”⁵⁵ Equiano’s description of the Miskitos is almost identical

to Michel de Montaigne's account of the indigenous inhabitants of the Western Hemisphere. Montaigne wrote that "these nations, then, seem to me barbarous only in this sense, they have been fashioned very little by the human mind, and are still very close to their original naturalness."⁵⁶ Thus, while Equiano presents himself as an autonomous epistemic subject who is able to draw on his experiences to undermine certain knowledge claims about Africans, there were limits to this epistemic autonomy. In this case, Equiano demonstrated little interest in challenging received views of the indigenous inhabitants of the Western Hemisphere.

Equiano and capitalism

This section examines the problem of Equiano's views on capitalism – an emerging economic system that by definition he had a complex relationship with. This was because Equiano had been enslaved due to the demands of the capitalist system but came to see capitalism as emancipatory in character. At the same time, Equiano argued that his experiences provided him with unusual insights into the workings of the capitalist world system and its social structures. Equiano's descriptions of multiple, post-emancipation trips to the Mediterranean are particularly revealing. Writing about a trip to Genoa, he states that it "is one of the finest cities I ever saw; some of the edifices were of beautiful marble, and made a most noble appearance; and many had very curious fountains before them. The churches were rich and magnificent, and curiously adorned both in the inside and out. But all this grandeur was, in my eyes, disgraced by the galley-slaves, whose condition, both there and in other parts of Italy, is truly piteous and wretched."⁵⁷ Taken in context, Equiano is claiming that, due to his social position, as a formerly enslaved person, some features of the social structure of Genoa, such as the fact that it is built on slavery, are especially salient for him.

A privileging of experience as a source of knowledge is implicit in all versions of standpoint epistemology.⁵⁸ This very much applied to Equiano who, as an unusually mobile subject who visited four continents, was able to accumulate knowledge through direct experience that was not available to most of his contemporaries.⁵⁹ In turn, Equiano's emphasis on his mobility in the *Interesting Narrative* is calculated to buttress his standing with those readers who adhered to some form of empiricism. Commenting on the breadth of his travels, Carretta notes that "Equiano found himself between 1768 and 1772 on the working man's version of the grand tours taken by the sons of the wealthy to finish their education by travelling around Europe. But unlike those tourists, whose goal was to observe the grandeur of the past in Continental Europe, Equiano's tour included a comparative study of modern systems of slavery in the Mediterranean and West Indies."⁶⁰ Carretta's account should be modified in order to take into consideration the fact that Equiano's heightened receptivity to the existence of relations of servitude and domination in Continental Europe need not be understood by attributing to Equiano a conscious desire to engage in a comparative study of slavery. We can develop a functional explanation for why institutions of slavery acquired this level of saliency for Equiano. Equiano's travels in a world where his body was marked for slavery meant that he had to develop a heightened awareness of it in order to survive at all.

Moreover, it is entirely plausible to hold that at least some core structural features of societies on Continental Europe were more striking to Equiano than to the sons of

noblemen who were embarking on grand tours. Equiano is undermining the claim to a kind of civilizational ownership over Continental Europe that was made by those embarking on grand tours. Equiano is implicitly claiming that those who claim ownership, or perhaps a strong relation of affinity, vis-à-vis the past and present of Continental Europe without understanding the oppression that, in part, sustained its development, are only capable of maintaining a superficial relationship vis-à-vis Europe's heritage.⁶¹ Equiano's remarks on Genoa are particularly revealing because it is possible to interpret his description as representing a more general insight into the nature of the capitalist world-system in a city that played an important role in the development of capitalism.⁶² Thus, by chronicling the underbelly of a city that played an outsized role in the creation of capitalism, Equiano situates himself as an epistemic subject who is capable of detecting aspects of the capitalist world-system that are not as notable to others, who were not victimized by it in the manner in which he was victimized by it and who did not struggle against it in the same manner in which he did.⁶³ Thus, Equiano's writings are not just an illustration of standpoint epistemology, rather they contain an implicit early formulation of it.

Equiano was not, of course, a critic of capitalism. Nor should we expect him to have been, for even the most radical of eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinkers did not criticize capitalism as such – indeed the term itself had yet to be coined. Some radical Enlightenment thinkers held that the search for profit for the sake of profit through commerce was leading to increased systematic violence and to the plundering of the colonized world. For example, Diderot puts the following words in the mouth of the commercial capitalist, “let my country perish, let the region I command perish; perish the citizen and the foreigner; perish my associate, provided that I can enrich myself with his spoils. All parts of the universe are alike to me. When I have laid waste, exhausted, and impoverished one country. I shall always find another, to which I can carry my gold.”⁶⁴ Thus, we get criticisms of the avariciousness of the merchant capitalists, but we do not see anything like a systematic critique of capitalism, based on an understanding of the law of value in the Marxist sense.⁶⁵ Hence, we should not expect that Equiano would represent himself as a systematic critic of capitalism. Nevertheless, it remains the case that Equiano is clearly aware that in the context of capitalist social relations, religious norms regarding the treatment of others as you would like to be treated are pushed aside, when he writes that “Mr. Drummond told me that he had sold 41,000 negroes, and that he once cut off a negro-man's leg for running away – I asked him, if the man had died in the operation? How he, as a Christian, could answer for the horrid act before God? And he told me, answering was a thing of another world; but what he thought and did were policy.”⁶⁶ As Wheelock notes, Drummond's response represents “the state's official position on valuing black humanity.”⁶⁷ Equiano is aware of the manner in which racial capitalism in today's parlance systematically violates one subset of religious norms while at the same time being upheld by another subset of religious norms.

Equiano identifies the destruction that is wrought by capitalism and the manner in which it undermines human social ties throughout his work. Yet he also sincerely held that just as relations of commodity exchange had led to his servitude, they could also lead to his emancipation, through the purchasing of his own freedom. Accordingly, Ross J. Pudaloff is correct when he contends that in Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*, we encounter a “valorization of capitalism”⁶⁸ and that “trade encodes Equiano as an agent

in a process that necessarily makes each party to a transaction equal by virtue of freely engaging in the transaction.⁶⁹ This was true even in light of Equiano's racialization in a manner that identified him with the social position of an enslaved person, because Equiano asserted that his equality can be defined vis-à-vis others in the context of the realm of commodity exchange. The formal structure of the realm of commodity exchange presupposes, in the words of Karl Marx, that the seller of the commodity "and the owner of the money meet in the market, and enter into relations with each other on a footing of equality as owners of commodities."⁷⁰ This explains how Equiano thought that it was possible for him to assert his equality by way of participating in commodity exchange, even if commodification was what led to his enslavement in the first place.⁷¹

Equiano was not considered a legal equal to a free white person with whom he entered into a commercial contract. This reality hindered his ability to obtain restitution when he was cheated out of money that was his due, leaving him to lament that "I had lent my captain some money, which I now wanted, to enable me to prosecute my intentions. This I told him; but when I applied for it, though I urged the necessity of my occasion, I met with so much shuffling from him, that I began at last to be afraid of losing my money, as I could not recover it by law; for I have already mentioned, that throughout the West Indies no black man's testimony is admitted on any occasion, against any white person whatsoever."⁷² One can argue that notwithstanding this legal inequality, the formal structure of commodity exchange presupposes that each party recognizes the other party as equal to itself, at least in relation to an individual's ability to dispose freely of the commodities that are under that person's control. The very notion of a contractual transaction would be incoherent if the contracting parties were not held to be at least formally equal. Equiano made a distinction between the legal framework within which commodity exchange was carried out in the slave societies of the West Indies and the formal structure of commodity exchange, holding that the latter would allow him to assert his equality to white people. Equiano recognized that strictly speaking a commodity cannot own another commodity, and that insofar as others choose to trade with him, they implicitly recognize that he himself is not a commodity, but rather a human being with a will that can dispose of the commodities in his possession. In relation to the realm of capitalist commodity exchange, Equiano knew that the hand that inflicts the wound is also the hand that heals the wound. In this manner Equiano challenges our presuppositions regarding how an enslaved person would have conceived of freedom. Robbie Shilliam in his critique of the manner in which nineteenth century political economists excised Atlantic slavery from their accounts of the workings of the capitalist mode of production argues that "to the enslaved, freedom was not immanent to commercial society – either progressively or dialectically – but lay outside/against/besides/before it."⁷³ However, this was not the case for Equiano, who was certain that he could gain and preserve his freedom through greater participation in commercial society. For example, unlike later authors of slave narratives, Equiano does not express any angst over the fact that he had to purchase his freedom.⁷⁴ After he successfully buys his freedom he describes his feelings in the following terms, "my feet scarcely touched the ground, for they were winged with joy, and, like Elijah, as he rose to Heaven, they 'were with lightening sped as I went on."⁷⁵

Emphasizing Equiano's commitment to capitalist commodity exchange as a potential route to freedom also brings to our attention the fact that Equiano found some solace

in what Max Weber described as the “Protestant Ethic” and its attendant emphasis on commercial success as a sign of election. According to Weber, a Calvinist had an “absolute duty to consider oneself chosen, and to combat all doubts as temptations of the devil, since lack of self confidence is the result of insufficient faith, hence of imperfect grace [...] a duty to attain certainty of one’s own election and justification in the daily struggle of life.”⁷⁶ Throughout Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* we encounter descriptions of situations where providence intervenes in order to save him.⁷⁷ This emphasis on providence is meant to convey to the reader that he believed that he was amongst the elect.⁷⁸ In fact, Equiano explicitly connects success in commercial endeavors to the role of providence in his life. Commercial success is represented as an external sign of his election, leading him to in one case reflect that “I afterwards gained near three hundred per cent, on the sale of them; so that in the event it proved a happy circumstance for me that I had not bought the bullocks I intended, for they must have perished with the rest; I could not help looking upon this, otherwise trifling circumstance, as a particular providence of God, and was thankful accordingly.”⁷⁹ Reading Equiano as an adherent to Calvinism with its emphasis on predestination,⁸⁰ we can see him as asserting both his equality to other Christians and his superiority over other Christians. According to Calvinism only a few Christians are amongst the elect. Commercial success was seen as a sign of election. Equiano represents himself as amongst the elect few. This is an example of the manner in which Equiano is able to use conceptual tools from European culture to further his own ends. Just as those who justified the enslavement of Equiano and other Black Africans were able to utilize some strands of Christianity and some Christian tropes in order to justify their behavior, so Equiano is able to use some strands of Christian discourse to argue not only for his equality, but to even assert his superiority in relation to most people who claimed to be Christians.⁸¹

Internal critique and Enlightenment discourses

The concept of internal critique allows us to understand the argumentative structure of Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* in a manner that takes seriously his status as an Enlightenment intellectual. According to Hegel, an internal or immanent critique is a critique that proceeds from standards of justification that are endorsed by the person who is advancing the claim that is being subjected to critique. The idea here is that in any philosophical dispute, where we adhere to a different standard of justification from the one that our interlocutor adheres to, our interlocutor can evade our criticisms by asking: why should I adopt this specific standard as an adequate standard for philosophical justification? What justifies this standard? And essentially the dispute runs into a version of the dilemma of the criterion. If we justify a standard by using another standard, then we run into a regress problem. If we just assumed the adequacy of a standard without further justification, then we are guilty of dogmatism. Hegelian internal critique is, as Kenneth Westphal has pointed out, an attempt to sidestep the dilemma of the criterion.⁸² Hegel himself is explicit in saying that “the refutation must not come from outside, that is, it must not proceed from assumptions lying outside the system in question and that do not correspond to it.”⁸³ Hegel points out that if we attempt to refute a system by adopting standards of justification which are not recognized by the proponents of the system in

question, then the proponents of the “system need only refuse to recognize those assumptions” in order to reject our refutation.⁸⁴

Through the lens of internal critique, we can understand the manner in which Equiano uses his knowledge of Christianity in order to criticize the proponents of theories of white supremacy. For example, we can note his use of the concept of nominal Christians to refer to people who purport to adhere to the normative and ethical standards that are described in the Bible, but who in fact violate those very same standards.⁸⁵ He also employs the word “Christian” ironically on some occasions, such as his claim that “the last war favoured this poor negro-man, and he found some means to escape from his Christian master.”⁸⁶ Equiano also uses Biblical discourse in order to argue in favour of monogenesis,⁸⁷ thus undermining one strand of racist discourse in the eighteenth century. This strand rejected biblical justification for the thesis that all humans have a common origin, and then deployed that rejection to argue against human racial equality. Voltaire was a key proponent of this racist polygenist strand of thinking.⁸⁸ Equiano also emphasizes Biblical passages where the oppressor is physically struck down by the oppressed.⁸⁹ This is evidenced by his explicit invocation of the “just cause Moses had in redressing his brother against the Egyptian.”⁹⁰ Moses, of course, engaged in divinely sanctioned violence against the oppressors. Here, the Calvinist concept of a wrathful God is being deployed by Equiano for abolitionist purposes.⁹¹ This is one of many cases in which Equiano employs the conceptual framework of Christianity, along with its attendant standards of justification such as Biblical citations in order to justify the right of the oppressed to physically resist their oppressors.

Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* should be understood as an Enlightenment text that both draws on some of the movement’s principles and ideas and refines them. In the case of internal critique in the *Interesting Narrative*, Equiano demonstrates that Europeans are not the only people who are able to use Enlightenment ideas to justify their views. Furthermore, we can read Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* as the product of the Atlantic World as a theory-generating space. With respect to this point, Laurent Dubois’s methodological intervention in relation to debates over how we should study the history of the Enlightenment is vitally important. According to Dubois, “the construction of a more integrated history of the Enlightenment can contribute to the broader rethinking in a variety of fields of the ways in which the set of discursive and intellectual habits wrongly identified as ‘western’ thought emerged through the process of imperial conquest and consolidation and the responses it engendered.”⁹² It is a mistake to think of core ideas of Enlightenment philosophy, such as the emphasis on individual human rights, as the exclusive product of Western thought, devoid of input by people such as Equiano.⁹³ Dubois argues that the space of theorization was not exclusively located in Western Europe, instead it “was an Atlantic one that included the classic texts and debates we understand as constituting the Enlightenment, to be sure, but which was also fundamentally shaped by the actions of individuals, both enslaved and free, who were subjected to the violent forms of racial exclusion that under-girded the imperial systems of the eighteenth century.”⁹⁴ Dubois’s revelations even more firmly establish Equiano as an Enlightenment thinker, but one who engaged with major debates at the same time that he suffered racial exclusion.⁹⁵ This reality made standpoint epistemology and the concept of internal critique particularly effective intellectual weapons for Equiano.

Failure to recognize that the Enlightenment was not a monolithic movement has led some scholars to mischaracterize the relationship between it and Equiano. For example, Ide Corley argues that “nascent aspirations to represent Equiano as a visionary or a redemptive figure of modernity are prohibited by his apparent acquiescence to Enlightenment reason.”⁹⁶ The main problem with Corley’s view is that it presupposes that there was one monolithic entity that we can refer to as “Enlightenment reason.” Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, Corley does not think that it is possible to conceive of a relationship between Equiano and Enlightenment discourses that does not center around acquiescence, with its connotations of passivity, on the one hand, and bare rejection on the other hand. In fact, at no point does Corley discuss the possibility that Equiano was an active participant in Enlightenment discourses. Similarly, Carl Plasa claims that Equiano “preforms a critique of the master’s ‘books.’”⁹⁷ However, it is unclear why we should still speak of such books as “the master’s books” even when we acknowledge that Equiano has been able to carry out an internal critique of such texts and discourses. Equiano understood the master’s books better than the master himself.

In this light, Edward L. Robinson Jr. is correct when he argues that Equiano retained an outsider status vis-à-vis European society,⁹⁸ without claiming that this implies that he maintained an outsider status with respect to Enlightenment discourses.⁹⁹ Thus, when Robinson Jr. claims that “Equiano loved Euro-American culture, social institutions, and religion,” the question becomes to what extent is Robinson Jr. conflating radical Enlightenment discourses and their emphasis on universal human rights, which de-legitimized slavery, with “Euro-American culture”?¹⁰⁰ We may accept the claim that at least some aspects of “Euro-American culture” were informed by radical Enlightenment discourses, but it does not follow from this claim that “Euro-American culture” and “radical Enlightenment discourses” are to be treated as co-extensive concepts. This is the logical consequence of taking seriously the idea that, in the words of Esther Lezra, “the tradition of Enlightenment discourse was not autochthonous to Europe but deeply indebted to African peoples, traditions, and patterns of knowledge.”¹⁰¹

Israel argues that there were two competing strands of Enlightenment thinking in the eighteenth century. First, there was the reformist moderate strand, the adherents to which emphasized varying types of compromises between the authority of reason and the authority of religion and custom. Adherents to this strand of Enlightenment discourse included, for example: John Locke (1632–1704), David Hume (1711–1776), M. de Voltaire (1694–1778), and Charles Louis de Secondat, Baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu (1689–1755), among others. Second, there was a more radical strand, with its emphasis on monistic materialism, and it included amongst others Denis Diderot (1713–1784), Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d’Holbach (1723–1789), and Claude Adrien Helvétius (1715–1771).¹⁰² While moderate Enlightenment thinkers such as Anne Robert Jacques Turgot (1727–1781), Montesquieu, and Hume could criticize what they took to be the excesses of the Atlantic slave trade and the slave societies of the Western Hemisphere, they did not criticize the system as a whole.¹⁰³ On the issue of slavery, the adherents of the radical strand of the Enlightenment were far more forceful in their critique. In fact, some radicals, like Diderot and Louis de Jaucourt (1704–1779), argued for the legitimacy of armed slave revolts. By contrast, David Hume argued that the expansion of networks of commercial exchange would contribute to the cultivation of “civility”¹⁰⁴ while ignoring the horrors of the Atlantic slave trade.¹⁰⁵ Equiano rectifies this inconsistency by sharing Hume’s conviction that

commercial relations can be a path to prosperity and freedom, but then drawing attention to the “incivility” involved in the Atlantic slave trade.

Equiano directly participated in the strand of Enlightenment discourse that argued that slavery was an institution that undermined the type of sociability which was necessary for successful commercial pursuits. This was an argument that was advanced by thinkers such as Gershom Carmichael (1672–1729) who taught courses on jurisprudence and moral philosophy at the University of Glasgow.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, even when some of the adherents to the moderate strand of the Enlightenment denounced the cruelty involved in modern slavery such as Voltaire in *Candide*,¹⁰⁷ they did not directly confront the theories that were used to justify slavery. Voltaire, for example, both described the cruelty on plantations that made sugar consumption possible in Europe while advocating for polygenesis. Furthermore, when describing sub-Saharan Africans, Voltaire wrote that “their round eyes, their flat noses, their always fat lips, their differently figured ears, the wool on their heads, and even the measure of their intelligence, indicate prodigious differences between them and other species of men.”¹⁰⁸ Equiano’s argument in favor of monogenesis is critical of Voltaire and all other defenders of polygenesis, a racist theory that pro-slavery advocates came to utilize with growing frequency in the late eighteenth century.

Helvétius, Diderot, and Jaucourt explicitly denounced slavery in terms that Voltaire and Hume did not. For example, in *De l’esprit* (1758), Helvétius derided slavery for the suffering that it inflicted on the enslaved and for the wars that were fomented by Europeans on the African continent in order to ensure a steady supply of captives. Helvétius claimed that “no cask of sugar arrives in Europe that is not tainted by human blood.”¹⁰⁹ A diachronic perspective provides a revealing glimpse into the developing thought of Enlightenment figures on the issue of slavery. For example, Jaucourt presented uncritical accounts of West African societies in his entries on Africa in the *Encyclopédie* that reproduced many of the trope-filled and pro-slavery travel accounts, which, for example, described slavery as a benevolent institution that saved the lives of captives who were purchased by European slave traders who would otherwise have been killed by their captors.¹¹⁰ However, by 1766 Jaucourt had adopted an anti-slavery position because of a newfound conviction that it violated the equality that was meant to be enjoyed by all humans in accordance with natural law. For example, Jaucourt now argued that slavery “violates religion, morality, natural law, and all the rights of human nature.”¹¹¹ Furthermore, Jaucourt directly confronted the economic argument against abolition by taking a moral stance and proclaiming that he would prefer “that European colonies be destroyed, rather than do so much wrong.”¹¹²

Taking a diachronic view also allows us to account for the fact that the first two editions of Raynal’s *Histoire des deux Indes* (first published in 1770) did not unequivocally criticize theories of racial superiority or slavery. In fact, it was not until the 1780 third edition of the *Histoire des deux Indes* that the text became fiercely anti-slavery through the contributions of Diderot.¹¹³ The 1780 version of the *Histoire des deux Indes* also illustrates the different strands of intellectual discourse that constituted the Enlightenment. Guillaume Thomas François Raynal was not himself an abolitionist, and even in the parts of the text where he seems to be advocating for the abolition of slavery he often slides into an ameliorative discourse.¹¹⁴ For example, in Book 11, where the most sustained account of slavery and the Atlantic slave trade in the text is to be found, Raynal describes the horrors of the slave trade,¹¹⁵ but then switches to advocating for ameliorative measures by stating that “there

are other extremely important bad practices which need to be corrected in this trade, which is in any case a most unhealthy one."¹¹⁶ He also argues that the study of history shows that for slavery to be useful to the masters, it must be "humane."¹¹⁷ The idea here is that it is in the interest of the enslavers to stabilize the social relations that they depend on. According to Raynal, slavery could be rendered legitimate if it is made humane. This is obviously not an abolitionist stance. Conversely, Nicolas de Condorcet and Diderot were much more hostile to slavery, the latter arguing that those who wanted to regulate the slave trade "added hypocrisy to barbarism."¹¹⁸

Diderot argued that it is simply not possible to consistently adhere to the core principles of Enlightenment discourse regarding natural rights without denouncing slavery in principle. According to Diderot even if a non-cruel form of slavery existed it would be illegitimate. He also argues that the reason that Europeans are not moved by the sufferings of the enslaved is because "the torments of a people who are the source of our luxuries never reach our hearts."¹¹⁹ The question of the grounds upon which slavery ought to be denounced is an important one. For it is possible to argue that slavery ought to be criticized for its cruelty. However, there are significant issues with this claim. First, many abolitionists characterized domestic slavery as less cruel than chattel slavery.¹²⁰ If someone holds this to be true, then the cruelty argument against slavery would not work for domestic slavery. In my view the idea that domestic slavery is less cruel than chattel slavery is not tenable in any way, but the point is that even if it was less cruel, there were Enlightenment arguments from natural law that rendered it illegitimate. Equiano's views on what constitutes the essential harm associated with enslavement shift depending upon which kind of slavery he is discussing. When Equiano describes the domestic slavery that existed in Igbo society, which can be described as a society with slaves and not a slave society,¹²¹ he does not condemn it, stating that the enslaved "do no more work than other members of the community, even their masters."¹²² This position can be explained by the fact that he implicitly adopted the view that cruelty is the most oppressive feature of slavery, at least when analyzing domestic slavery.

At other times in the *Interesting Narrative*, Equiano almost echoes the thesis put forth by Howard McGary and Bill E. Lawson that "the slaves saw the claim of ownership as the identifying mark of oppression" in relation to the condition of enslavement.¹²³ In the *Interesting Narrative*, for example, Equiano argues that slavery "violates that first natural right of mankind, equality and independency, and gives one man a dominion over his fellows which God could never intend!"¹²⁴ In this case Equiano's invocation of the "natural right of mankind" is similar to John Locke's assertion of the "equality of men by nature" which appears in his *Second Treatise* and is based on a more fundamental ontological claim that it is evident "that creatures of the same species and rank, promiscuously born to all the same advantages of nature, and the use of the same faculties, should also be equal one amongst another without subordination or subjection."¹²⁵ Locke's argument is that because all humans have the same fundamental capacities for reasoning, they must be equal. Locke assumes that only clear differences in fundamental reasoning capacities could justify claims to inequality.¹²⁶ Of course, this claim to equality was restricted to certain kinds of people in the seventeenth century, it did not include enslaved Africans in the Americas. Locke did countenance slavery, but the only slavery that he explicitly allowed for is the enslavement of someone who engaged in an unjust

war and was defeated.¹²⁷ Locke excludes wars of aggression and hereditary enslavement “because the miscarriages of the father are no faults of the children.”¹²⁸ It is obvious that this cannot provide the basis for justifying enslavement in the Americas which was hereditary in the sense that a child born to an enslaved mother was raised as an enslaved person. Yet on the Lockean theory, this would be illegitimate. If one assumes that Locke intended to justify the system of plantation slavery as it existed in the Atlantic world, then Locke’s attempt fails because the system was characterized by the principle that the condition of the child follows the condition of the mother.¹²⁹ One way to make sense of this conundrum is to put forth the hypothesis that Locke did not think that the principle of natural equality applied to Africans in the first place.¹³⁰ If this is the case, then Locke might have thought that his restrictions on legitimate forms of enslavement did not apply to Africans in the first place.

Equiano, however, extends the scope of the natural right to equality and de-racializes its application. In particular, he rejects the idea that some groups of humans, namely Africans, are less than human, and in his letter to the abolitionist Samuel Pratt, Equiano identifies the key conceit that was made by many defenders of slavery. If the defenders of slavery sincerely think that humans have certain inviolable rights by virtue of being human, then they could not legitimize the enslavement of Africans without denying their full humanity. Pro-slavery intellectuals recognized this problem and attempted to remedy it by depicting Africans as “beast of burthen.”¹³¹ Once one rejects the idea that Africans are sub-human “beasts of burthen,” the Lockean dictum that all humans have a basic inviolable right to freedom would make the enslavement of Africans illegitimate.¹³² This conceptual move is central to Equiano’s anti-slavery critique.

Equiano’s argument makes him an active participant in Enlightenment philosophical discourse. Lockean ideas have frequently been pointed out as precursors to the “rights talk” which characterized many Enlightenment discourses,¹³³ and Equiano participates in some of these discourses. Furthermore, Equiano is in fact one of the first thinkers to use the phrase “human rights” in its contemporary sense.¹³⁴ For example, Equiano describes the people who captured him in Africa as “destroyers of human rights.”¹³⁵ This was a reference to universal human rights that was identical to the idea of the “natural and imprescriptible rights of man” that was invoked by revolutionary thinkers such as Thomas Paine.¹³⁶

Equiano explicitly situates himself as a participant in at least one strand of Enlightenment discourse. In a letter addressed to the pro-slavery apologist Gordon Turnbull, Equiano referred to his present day as “this enlightened age.”¹³⁷ Thus, Equiano is explicitly tracking the self-consciousness of the era and deploying it in order to arrive at his emancipatory goals. Equiano recognized that he lived in an age where the autonomy of reason was being explicitly invoked and defended. He wished to indicate that the implications of the autonomy of reason in the sphere of political and social philosophy rendered slavery illegitimate. In another letter to James Tobin, Equiano argues for the legitimacy of interracial sexual unions by appealing to a favourite trope of Enlightenment philosophers in their discussion of sexual morality, namely the juxtaposition between what nature freely allows and what arbitrary human convention forbids.¹³⁸ Equiano points out that because “no contamination of the virtues of the heart could result from the [interracial] union, the mixture of colour could be of no consequence.”¹³⁹ This is another case in which Equiano situates himself as an Enlightenment philosopher by highlighting the

irrationality of some human conventions which have been unfairly imputed with authority by misusing nature as a normative standard.

Cruelty was a very salient element in Atlantic chattel slavery. However, what was distinctive about chattel slavery was the fact that one set of human beings claimed and exercised ownership over another set of human beings. As McGary and Lawson write, “the legal right to own another human being was the essential feature in American chattel slavery. We must remember this fact when distinguishing American chattel slavery from other forms of oppression.”¹⁴⁰ This point is echoed in *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen* (1837). Allen writes that enslavement remained degrading even if the master is not cruel, for “slavery is a bitter pill, notwithstanding we had a good master.”¹⁴¹ Having a good master does nothing to alleviate the relationship of ownership and the loss of independence associated with it. Equiano recognizes this. However, if Equiano is to be consistent, then he should recognize that even if domestic slavery amongst the Igbo was not characterized by cruelty, it was still degrading insofar as it violated the natural right to freedom that everyone possessed.¹⁴²

The enslaved are deprived of their natural rights insofar as their equality is denied and insofar as they are rendered completely dependent on another human being, regardless of how they are treated. Thus, even if Equiano does not explicitly criticize domestic slavery amongst the Igbo or in any other eighteenth-century society, he provides us with the conceptual tools for doing so using natural rights. By situating ownership as a distinctively oppressive feature of slavery and one that distinguishes it from other forms of oppression, Equiano presents himself as a member of and contributor to the more radical strands of Enlightenment discourse. Equiano would agree with Diderot that “liberty is the ownership of the self.”¹⁴³ This definition of liberty would imply that any form of slavery is a violation of liberty and of the natural right of human beings. This point has been neglected by some Equiano scholars in their discussion of his account of domestic slavery.¹⁴⁴

Equiano’s views on the institution of slavery are complicated by his role in procuring slaves for Dr. Irving and then supervising them on a Mosquito Shore plantation. Equiano writes that “our vessel being ready to sail for the Mosquito shore, I went with the Doctor on board a Guinea-man, to purchase some slaves to carry with us, and cultivate a plantation; and I chose them all of my own countrymen, some of whom came from Libya.”¹⁴⁵ By this point in the *Interesting Narrative* Equiano was a formally free man, although his position was rather precarious as he was frequently cheated by people who held more power than him. While Equiano makes no effort to hide that he both helped to purchase the slaves and then supervised them as they worked, he never claims that this is normatively justified. Instead, he was uncomfortable with every aspect of establishing the Mosquito Shore plantation, suffering pangs of conscience. Equiano even attributed his suffering on the Mosquito Shore to divine punishment. He writes that this thought “hurt my mind very much. I often wished to leave this place and set sail for Europe; for our mode of procedure and living in this heathenish form was very irksome to me. The word of God saith, ‘What does it avail a man if he gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?’”¹⁴⁶ It is probable that the “mode of procedure” which Equiano describes as having weighed heavily on his conscience was his involvement with slavery on the Mosquito Shore, an institution that he held to be incompatible with Christianity and natural human rights. While Equiano never views slavery as being

normatively justified, he does present himself as ameliorating the condition of the enslaved who he oversaw on the Mosquito Shore.¹⁴⁷

Equiano's contention that slavery was illegitimate because it violated human rights situates him alongside other radical Enlightenment thinkers who attacked amelioration. Justin Roberts has shown that, starting in the mid-eighteenth century, planters in the Anglophone slave societies of the Americas, began to argue that the institution of slavery in the Caribbean could be reformed and made more "benevolent" and economically efficient.¹⁴⁸ According to Roberts, "planters in the plantation Americas were, in essence, offering alternative visions of modernity that did not see slavery and enlightened civilization or progress, moral or economic, as incompatible."¹⁴⁹ Conversely, Equiano did not accept any possibility of an enlightened slavery that ameliorated the condition of the enslaved.

Conclusion: Dispossessing the master of his tools

The main contention of this article is twofold. First, it contends that Equiano was conscious of the way in which his experiences enabled him to acquire a privileged epistemic standpoint in some domains such as the axiology of freedom. Second, it contends that Equiano used this privileged epistemic standpoint to undertake an internal critique of anti-abolitionist arguments. Christopher Apap has argued that "Equiano's larger argument is that, in the end, one does have to play by the rules of the system that one finds oneself in."¹⁵⁰ Equiano was engaged in an internal or immanent critique of planters and their supporters, by showing that it is not possible to consistently adhere to the normative principles which constitute the core of Enlightenment thinking while recognizing slavery as normatively justified. This has obvious consequences for debates about whether the core of the Enlightenment project was compatible with slavery. The fact that most European Enlightenment philosophers were not abolitionists does not settle this question. It is entirely possible that they did not adequately grasp the consequences of the normative principles that they embraced. If my interpretation of Equiano is correct, then despite the protestations of many Enlightenment philosophers, the core of the Enlightenment was in fact incompatible with the normative justification of slavery.

Julie K. Ward has argued that the fact that Equiano successfully adapted various "Enlightenment arguments" and was able to recast them for his own purpose "would seem to undermine Audre Lorde's dictum that 'the master's tools could never dismantle the master's house.'"¹⁵¹ While I am sympathetic towards Ward's account, I have taken a different approach. For I have argued that, by way of successful internal critique, Equiano was able to show that Enlightenment discourse should not be counted amongst the "master's tools." Indeed, Equiano demonstrated that he had a better understanding of what the core principles of the Enlightenment entailed than the "masters," by, for example, appealing to the notion of human rights in his critique of slavery.¹⁵² In doing so, he was able to demonstrate that the masters' claims to ownership over the core principles of Enlightenment philosophy were just as fraudulent as their claims over enslaved Africans.

At the methodological level, emphasis on the philosophical elements in Equiano's text shows that while it is true that Equiano actively participated in the literary sentimentalism which was ubiquitous in the eighteenth century, there are important discursive

argumentative elements in his writing which have hitherto been obscured. There are two layers to Equiano's approach. The first layer focuses on cruelty and participates in the proliferation of sentimental literature which characterized the eighteenth century. The second layer presents a discursive argument drawing on the modern notion of human rights, the formation of which Equiano contributes to. Thus, a philosophical approach to Equiano's text does not aim to supplant more well established literary and historical approaches to interpreting Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*, rather it supplements them by demonstrating the existence of facets of the text which were hitherto unrecognized. What is at stake in emphasizing the philosophical elements of Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* is the extent to which the core of Enlightenment philosophy is compatible with slavery. Equiano shows that the full working out of certain commitments to basic human rights, grounded in the autonomy of human reason, entails a repudiation of slavery without qualification. Finally, my analysis of Equiano's text shows that it is mistaken to conceive of Equiano's arguments as a deployment of the "master's tools." If we speak of the master's tools in this context, then we are presupposing a relationship of ownership. Yet to speak of ownership over a set of normative principles is rather strange. The fact that some person was the first to articulate a specific normative principle does not entail that this person owns it. The only way that we can make sense of talk of ownership in this context is to spell it out in terms of proficiency in the deployment of the normative principle in question. Proficiency, in turn, can be spelled out in terms of an understanding of what is logically entailed by a set of normative principles. If Equiano has a better understanding of what is logically entailed by the core normative principles of Enlightenment philosophy, then he has mastered them to a greater degree than someone who does not recognize what is logically entailed by them. Thus Equiano, on the interpretation which has been offered above, has in fact dispossessed the "master" of his tools.

Notes

1. Carretta, *Equiano, the African*, 61.
2. Henceforth, I will abbreviate the title of Equiano's autobiography as the *Interesting Narrative*.
3. *Ibid.*, 300–301.
4. Carretta. "New Equiana," 159–160.
5. Lewis, *Slavery, Imperialism, and Freedom*, 78.
6. Hanley, "The Equiano Effect," 262–271.
7. Carretta, *Equiano, the African*, 320; Acholonu, "The Igbo Origins of Olaudah Equiano," 49–66; Chuku, "Olaudah Equiano and the Foundation of Igbo Intellectual Tradition," 33–65; Lovejoy, "Construction of Identity," 93–100; Burnard, "Good-bye, Equiano, the African," 101–105; Carretta, "Does Equiano Still Matter?," 81–92; Carretta, "Response to Lovejoy, Burnard, Sensbach," 111–118.
8. There might appear to be a problem of how we can speak of multiple strands of the Enlightenment while also speaking of the core of the Enlightenment. However, this problem is solved if we recognize that the core of the Enlightenment was the emphasis on the autonomy of reason and that commitment to the autonomy of reason was expressed with different degrees of intensity and consistency in various strands of the Enlightenment. The radical strand was more totally committed to the autonomy of reason in a way that the moderate strand was not. The notion that the autonomy of reason is the core of the Enlightenment is derived from Ernst Cassirer's work. See Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, viii–ix; Renz, "Cassirer's Enlightenment," 636–652.

9. Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, 1–35.
10. Jonathan Israel thinks that adherence to some version of Spinoza's monistic metaphysics was what united the adherents of the radical Enlightenment. He also thinks that assertions of complete equality between human beings follows logically from Spinoza's metaphysics. I am much more skeptical about this latter claim, since it is not clear why there could not be hierarchies amongst human beings, even if we conceive of all human beings as modes of God or nature in Spinoza's sense. See Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, 11.
11. Wheelock, *Barbaric Culture and Black Critique*, 5.
12. Israel claims that "one-substance metaphysics went hand in hand with sweeping reform." See Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, 15. In fact, one-substance metaphysics was neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for radical politics.
13. Diderot, "Extracts from the *Histoire des Deux Indes*," 189.
14. Aching, "The Slave's Work," 912–917; Kohn, "Frederick Douglass's Master-Slave Dialectic," 497–514.
15. Willet, "The Master-Slave Dialectic," 151–170.
16. Especially when compared with Ottobah Cugano's *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery*. See Bernasconi, "Ottobah Cugano's Place in the History of Political Philosophy," 33.
17. Kelleter, "Ethnic Self-Determination," 80.
18. In fact, Hegel did not invent internal critique as an argumentative strategy, and he never claimed to have done so. Hegel only developed a general model for describing and explaining past occurrences of internal critique.
19. The importance of emphasizing this point was brought to my attention by an anonymous reviewer for *Atlantic Studies*.
20. Equiano, "Correspondence of Gustavus Vassa, or Olaudah Equiano not published in *The Interesting Narrative*," 335.
21. Plasa, "'Stained with Spots of Human Blood,'" 225–243; Robinson, Jr., "'Of Remarkable Omens in My Favour,'" 187–207; Ward, "'The Master's Tools,'" 79–98.
22. Equiano, "The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano," 180.
23. *Ibid.*
24. Therefore, we can say that Equiano has attained a "standpoint" in the sense defined by Alison Wylie. According to Wylie a standpoint is "a critical consciousness about the nature of our social location and the difference it makes epistemically." See Wylie, "Why Standpoint Matters," 31.
25. Harding, "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology," 443.
26. Hartsock, "The Feminist Standpoint," 284.
27. *Ibid.*, 285.
28. Collins, "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought," 749.
29. *Ibid.*, 757.
30. Prah, *Jacobus Eliza Johannes Capitein*, 59.
31. This would also seem to indicate that the empiricist assumptions which form the basis of standpoint epistemology require some modification in a rationalist direction.
32. Chuku, "Olaudah Equiano and the Foundation of Igbo Intellectual Tradition," 34.
33. Gallego, "Rewriting History," 143. See also Carretta, "Response to Lovejoy, Burnard, Sensbach," 118.
34. Eke, "(Re)Imagining Community," 23–47.
35. Nevertheless, it is possible for somebody to subscribe to anti-Black racist theories and still condemn slavery. For example, they might think that slavery is not economically efficient while still holding racist views.
36. Equiano, "The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano," 45.
37. This conception of ideology is defended at length in El Nabolsoy, "Aristotle on Natural Slavery," 245–246.
38. The question of the extent to which such theories may be referred to as racist theories depends on the extent to which differences which are the products of culture are taken to be irreversible.

39. Equiano, "The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano," 78.
40. *Ibid.*, 45.
41. *Ibid.*, 61.
42. *Ibid.*, 32.
43. Boulukos, "Olaudah Equiano and the Eighteenth-Century Debate on Africa," 246.
44. *Ibid.* Equiano's refusal to follow simplistic depictions of Africans in his own account of Igbo people is also important in light of the fact that between 1662 and 1807, Igbos constituted the largest ethnic group of enslaved Africans in the British triangular trade, see Richardson, "Through a Looking Glass," 66.
45. There is no direct evidence that suggests that Equiano was familiar with Diderot's work. Although given the popularity of the *Histoire Philosophique*, with 48 French editions and 20 editions in English printed by 1785, it is not unlikely that Equiano would have been familiar with Diderot's contributions to that book.
46. Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire*, 7.
47. *Ibid.*, 14. See also Arciniegas, *Why America? 500 Years of a Name*, 333.
48. These accounts were nourished by the writers of travel narratives, for example, William Dampier's description of the "Moskito Indians" as being without religion or government. See Dampier, *Piracy, Turtles and Flying Foxes*, 19–21. Álgar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's describes the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas as "beings so devoid of reason, uneducated, so brutish." See de Vaca, *The Shipwrecked Men*, 46.
49. Boulukos, "Olaudah Equiano and the Eighteenth-Century Debate on Africa," 247.
50. Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire*, 52.
51. Equiano, "The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano," 43.
52. *Ibid.*, 42.
53. *Ibid.*, 33.
54. Duffield and Edwards, "Equiano's Turks and Christians," 433–444.
55. Equiano, "The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano," 206.
56. Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire*, 15.
57. Equiano, "The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano," 169.
58. Intemann, "25 Years of Feminist Empiricism and Standpoint Theory," 785.
59. I thank an anonymous reviewer for *Atlantic Studies* for pressing me to clarify this point.
60. Carretta, *Equiano, the African*, 138–139.
61. Although Equiano makes a distinction between aesthetic judgements in relation to, for example, architecture and a recognition of the oppression through which the wealth which was deployed for the construction of a given building was obtained.
62. Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century*, 112.
63. While it is true that Equiano underemphasizes the manner in which the elites in England were complicit in the slave trade, for we know that as late as 1823 there were at least fifty-six MPs in the House of Commons with direct financial interests in slavery, see Stinchcombe, *Sugar Island Slavery in the Age of Enlightenment*, 185, this is not an epistemic oversight so much as it is a product of his rhetorical strategy. For his aim was to appeal to the ruling elites of England in order to abolish the slave trade and eventually slavery.
64. Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire*, 101.
65. As Charles Lipton has noted, there is a striking contrast in the manner in which radical materialist Enlightenment thinkers such as d'Holbach, Helvétius, and Diderot, articulated a well-developed materialist analysis in relation to philosophy of science and epistemology, and the manner in which they fell back to idealistic critiques when analyzing economic and social structures, see Lipton, "The Social Thought of Diderot," 126–142. Although, there are, as we will see below, some materialist elements in Diderot's analysis of the role of sugar in the triangular trade in the Atlantic.
66. Equiano, "The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano," 104.
67. Wheelock, *Barbaric Culture and Black Critique*, 94.
68. Pudaloff, "No Change Without Purchase," 503.
69. *Ibid.*, 513; Kelleter also emphasizes this point "Ethnic Self-Dramatization," 77–78.

70. Marx, *Capital*, 271.
71. Shilliam, "Forget English Freedom, Remember Atlantic Slavery," 596.
72. Equiano, "The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano," 161–162.
73. Shilliam, "Forget English Freedom, Remember Atlantic Slavery," 606.
74. Bugg, "Equiano's Trifles," 1045.
75. Equiano, "The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano," 136. Compare this to Harriet Jacobs' account in her *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), and the manner in which she refused to buy her own freedom. Jacobs writes, "I felt grateful for the kindness that prompted this offer [to buy her freedom], but the idea was not so pleasing to me as might have been expected. The more my mind had become enlightened, the more difficult it was for me to consider myself an article of property; and to pay money to those who had so grievously oppressed me seemed like taking from my sufferings the glory of triumph." See Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 222–223. We can observe the manner in which Jacobs, unlike Equiano, cannot see any possibility of emancipation through greater participation in commercial society, particularly when she is expected to treat herself as a commodity.
76. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 66–67.
77. However, some scholars have argued that Equiano's interpretation of the concept of providence drew on the concept of "chi," an Igbo concept that denoted a personal god that presided over each individual's life, see Edwards and Shaw, "The Invisible *Chi* in Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*," 146–156. This view is implausible given that Equiano left his homeland as a child. Thanks to Olúfẹmi Táíwò for emphasizing this point to me.
78. Although it should be noted that eighteenth century Methodism, to which Equiano adhered, was not a unified movement. Some Methodists adhered to Calvin's teachings while others followed Jacob Arminius' teachings, see Carretta, *Equiano, the African*, 166–168. Though it seems that Equiano accepted the Calvinist doctrine of predestination. See Equiano, "The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano," 190.
79. *Ibid.*, 143.
80. *Ibid.*, 190.
81. Gunn, "Literacy and the Humanizing Project," 7–8.
82. Westphal, *Hegel's Epistemology*, 2.
83. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 580.
84. *Ibid.*, 580–581. Note that Hegel speaks of systems doing the refutation, though it is more accurate to speak of individual proponents of the systems in question as engaging in refutation.
85. Equiano, "The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano," 61.
86. *Ibid.*, 102.
87. Frederick, "Olaudah Equiano's Views of Europe and European Christianity," 194.
88. Although some scholars have argued that Voltaire's rejection of monogenism was the exception that proves the rule in the context of the eighteenth century, and that most of the key figures that we associate with the development of scientific racism never explicitly deny monogenesis. See Smith, *Nature, Human Nature, and Human Difference*, 236. Polygenesis only became predominant during the nineteenth century with the rise of physical anthropology. See Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*, 67. However, we must recognize that adherence to monogenism is compatible with attempting to justify racial slavery. For example, one could adhere to monogenism and claim that the curse of Ham justified racial slavery. See Wheelock, *Barbaric Culture and Black Critique*, 130.
89. Elrod, "Moses and the Egyptian," 419.
90. Equiano, "The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano," 110.
91. Levecq, *Black Cosmopolitans*, 11.
92. Dubois, "An Enslaved Enlightenment," 3–4. For a similar version of this argument, see Grovogui, "To the Orphaned, Dispossessed, and Illegitimate Children," 41–63.
93. Aching, "The Slave's Work," 916. C. L. R. James, makes the point that "slaves who worked on the plantation came into direct contact with Europe's most advanced technology and,

- through their labor, belonged to a transatlantic modernity." See James, *The Black Jacobins*, 86. Julius Scott, *The Common Wind*, 176, has shown that there were lines of communication in the Caribbean during the eighteenth century which allowed enslaved individuals to communicate with each other across colonial boundaries and which allowed for the circulation of radical ideas through both written and oral mediums.
94. Dubois, "An Enslaved Enlightenment," 8.
 95. There is evidence to suggest that Equiano was a participant in Enlightenment discourse in its classic sense. For example, we know that Mary Wollstonecraft reviewed his *Narrative*. Equiano also knew Joseph Priestly personally. See Carretta, *Equiano, the African*, 338.
 96. Corley, "The Subject of Abolitionist Rhetoric," 139.
 97. Plasa, "'Stained with Spots of Human Blood,'" 232.
 98. Robinson, Jr., "'Of Remarkable Omens in My Favour,'" 195.
 99. The fundamental point is that a culture of Enlightenment and European culture are not co-extensive concepts. There are elements of European culture which remained anti-Enlightenment.
 100. *Ibid.*, 201.
 101. Lezra, "The Antillean Jewel and the European Imaginary," 41.
 102. Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, 18.
 103. On Montesquieu's discussion of slavery, see, Bernasconi, "Ottobah Cugoano's Place in the History of Political Philosophy," 31.
 104. Ince, "Between Commerce and Empire," 115.
 105. *Ibid.*, 125. Some historians of philosophy argue that Hume in fact denounced slavery, for example, Rosenthal, "'The Black, Scabby Brazilian,'" 211–221. They are not mistaken, however, the slavery that Hume explicitly denounced was the ancient slavery that existed in the slave societies of ancient Greece and ancient Rome and not Atlantic slavery. See Ince, "Between Commerce and Empire," 109.
 106. Guenther, "A Peculiar Silence," 452. On the manner in which Carmichael's opposition to slavery stands out from the writings of other eighteenth century philosophers, see Bernasconi, "Ottobah Cugano's Place in the History of Political Philosophy," 30.
 107. Watkins, "'Slaves Among Us,'" 1–11.
 108. Curran, *The Anatomy of Blackness*, 146.
 109. *Ibid.*, 181.
 110. *Ibid.*, 152.
 111. *Ibid.*, 183. It is also worth noting that Diderot only explicitly starts discussing slavery and colonialism in a systematic manner in the 1770s, see Dobie, "Going Global," 8.
 112. Curran, *The Anatomy of Blackness*, 183. However, it is unclear if Jaucourt would have adopted this line if he thought that abolition would bring about the economic ruin of the metropole in addition to the economic ruin of the colonies.
 113. *Ibid.*, 220. It is in its more radical guise that the text would influence the generation of Condorcet, Constantin François de Chassebœuf, comte de Volney, and François Jean de Beauvoir, Marquis de Chastellux in their critique of slavery and their call for abolition, see Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, 416.
 114. Pagden, "The Effacement of Difference," 129.
 115. Jimack, *A History of the Two Indies*, 149.
 116. *Ibid.*, 151.
 117. *Ibid.*, 155.
 118. Pagden, "The Effacement of Difference," 136.
 119. Jimack, *A History of the Two Indies*, 154. Thus, we see that there are some proto-historical materialist elements in Diderot's approach to social analysis.
 120. Abolitionists made this point in order to counter the argument that slavery was common in West Africa before the slave trade.
 121. Rolingher, "A Metaphor for Freedom," 93. Equiano seems to have a positive view of the Ottomans. See Equiano, "The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano," 167–168. It is unlikely that he was unaware that the Ottoman Empire was a society with slaves, where

- slavery was “multiracial, multiethnic, and generally domestic.” Powell, *A Different Shade of Colonialism*, 136. At this point in the *Interesting Narrative*, it seems that Equiano is primarily concerned with criticizing the slave societies of the West Indies.
122. Equiano, “The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano,” 40.
 123. McGary and Lawson, *Between Slavery and Freedom*, xxiii.
 124. Equiano, “The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano,” 111. Compare this to Edward Gibbon’s diatribe against the influence of human rights discourse on abolition, “But in this rage against slavery, in the numerous petitions against the slave trade, was there no leaven of new democratic principles? No wild ideas of the rights and natural equality of man?”, Lewis, *Slavery, Imperialism and Freedom*, 34.
 125. Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, 101.
 126. There is a theological background here, but it is not as simple as thinking that all humans are equal in the eyes of God. Rather, Locke’s point is that if God wanted us to be unequal, he would have made it so that this inequality would be clearly apparent to us in differences in fundamental reasoning capacities. Fear of punishment from God is what should motivate us, on Locke’s view, to err on the side of caution when making claims about human inequality. For a discussion of this point, see Hunt, Jr., “Locke on Equality,” 546–556.
 127. Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, 110.
 128. *Ibid.*, 181.
 129. Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 38–39.
 130. For an account of the various solutions which have been proffered for this interpretative problem, see Mills, “Locke on Slavery,” 487–497.
 131. Equiano, “Correspondence of Gustavus Vassa, or Olaudah Equiano not published in *The Interesting Narrative*,” 338.
 132. Characterizing the argument this way also reveals something interesting. Namely, that prior to the emergence of the modern notion of the rights of humanity, slavery did not necessitate the dehumanization of the enslaved at the conceptual level.
 133. Although there are debates about the extent to which Locke influenced eighteenth century political philosophy, see Edelstein, “Enlightenment Rights Talk,” 546–552.
 134. This is a point which has been neglected by some of the recent attempts to write the intellectual history of human rights. For example, it is neglected in Ferrone, “The Rights of History,” 130–141.
 135. Equiano, “The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano,” 51.
 136. Paine, “From Conclusion to Part 1, *The Rights of Man*,” 87.
 137. Equiano, “Correspondence of Gustavus Vassa, or Olaudah Equiano not published in *The Interesting Narrative*,” 330.
 138. This juxtaposition is very clear in, for example, Diderot’s discussion of the sexual morality of the Tahitians in his *Supplement to Bougainville’s ‘Voyage’*, 187–190.
 139. Equiano, “Correspondence of Gustavus Vassa, or Olaudah Equiano not published in *The Interesting Narrative*,” 329.
 140. McGary and Lawson, *Between Slavery and Freedom*, 15.
 141. Quoted from Smith Foster, *Witnessing Slavery*, 42–43. See also Starobin, *Blacks in Bondage*, 151.
 142. Equiano, “The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano,” 40.
 143. Jimack, *A History of the Two Indies*, 158. We may observe the extent to which this definition of liberty draws on an opposition to slavery. Diderot’s account of freedom should be located in the context of eighteenth-century political discourse, for slavery was a central metaphor in eighteenth century political discourse, Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*, 32–33. However, Diderot, unlike many of his contemporaries, such as Rousseau, did not just talk about slavery in a metaphorical sense. He also explicitly discussed and criticized existing slavery. Diderot makes this point explicitly when he writes that “people speak of crimes against nature and they do not cite slavery as the most horrific. The majority of European nations are spoiled by it, and a vile self-interest has stifled in human hearts all the feelings we owe to our fellow men.” See Diderot, “Extracts from the *Histoire des Deux Indes*,” 212.

144. For example, in Wheelock, *Barbaric Culture and Black Critique*, 84–85. See also, Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 110.
145. Equiano, “The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano,” 205.
146. *Ibid.*, 210.
147. *Ibid.*, 211.
148. Roberts, *Slavery and the Enlightenment in the British Atlantic*, 78.
149. *Ibid.*, 48.
150. Apap, “Caught Between Two Opinions,” 16.
151. Ward, “The Master’s Tools,” 93.
152. Equiano, “The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano,” 51.

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