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'When will the wickedness of man have an end?' The problem of divine providence in Cugoano's *Thoughts and Sentiments*[1]

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ABSTRACT

This essay presents a systematic reconstruction of the problem of divine providence in Quobna Ottobah Cugoano's *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery*. I argue that reading *Thoughts and Sentiments* in this frame allows interpreters to take Cugoano at his word without compromising on the religious and political sophistication of his argument. Cugoano, I show, develops an innovative account of providence's relationship to slavery by engaging both contemporary apologies for slavery and abolitionist arguments for divine retribution. His theory of providence accounts for slavery as a social inequality as well as the difficulty of making restitution for modern slavery.

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Quobna Ottobah Cugoano presents *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery* as a set of arguments derived from scriptural authority: "I intend to advance against that evil, criminal and wicked traffic of enslaving men … some Thoughts and Sentiments which occur to me, as being obvious from the Scriptures of Divine Truth, or such arguments as are chiefly deduced from thence."[2] The subtitle of the abbreviated 1791 version of the essay suggests the same scriptural grounding.[3] Nevertheless, there is scholarly debate about how much of a role religion plays in Cugoano's anti-slavery arguments. Some scholars argue that appeals to religion have a rhetorical function in Cugoano's text, while the normativity of Cugoano's abolitionism is derived primarily from secular sources like natural law or liberal political principles.[4] Others argue that *Thoughts and Sentiments* provides different sorts of anti-slavery arguments lacking an overarching framework.[5] These interpretations are understandable: religiously-moored critique is obviously less generalizable for the purposes of contemporary social criticism; moreover, it is quite possible, even productive, to reconstruct some of Cugoano's arguments without appealing to religious concepts. I do not intend to discourage such work. However, besides the fact that secularized interpretations do not take the author at his word, they also threaten to occlude some of the most ingenious features of Cugoano's argumentation in *Thoughts and Sentiments*.[6] As Henry, Wheelock, Wheeler, and Brown argue convincingly, the religious dimensions of Cugoano's essay are connected to his call for the immediate abolition of the slave trade; his innovative critique of the 'mark' of

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damnation;[7] and his analysis of Europe's (especially Britain's) cultural, moral, and political regression in the 18th century.[8]

Accordingly, I assume that *Thoughts and Sentiments* should be read as a text resting on religious foundations. This interpretive principle, to be sure, raises thorny questions about Cugoano's positive theological commitments, his biblical hermeneutics, and his theory of God's involvement in history. Many of these problems cannot be addressed without speculation. This circumstance, nevertheless, should not lead us to resignation in face of the religious structure of Cugoano's argumentation. Rather, in this essay, I propose that we can best make sense of *Thoughts and Sentiments* by seeing it as a sophisticated response to a problem simultaneously theological and political: *what is slavery's relationship to divine providence?* As many scholars have documented, the eighteenth century witnessed an explosion of reflections connecting theodicy, natural and social inequalities, and social progress.[9] Cugoano's essay was written at a moment of change in this discourse. On the one hand, in response to public pressure and the success of essays like Ramsay's (1784),[10] proslavery writers had begun to moderate their arguments. As Brown shows, public space for justifications of slavery had shrunk significantly by 1787. Instead of – for instance – appealing straightforwardly to the curse of Ham or the mark of Cain, defenders of slavery increasingly sought to complicate the moral debate by challenging the political or economic feasibility of their opponents' views or comparing slaves' conditions favorably with the white poor.[11] Thus, Cugoano had to address subtler and more insidious arguments defending slavery's compatibility with divine law and providence. On the other hand, abolitionist writers, especially Anthony Benezet, Thomas Clarkson, and Granville Sharp, had developed a novel framework for conceiving slavery's relation to providence.[12] They argued that God primarily acts in history to promote liberty and to abolish civilizations that harm liberty through slavery. Further, they claimed that the same signs of God's impending wrath were present in the Scriptures and Britain.[13] *Thoughts and Sentiments*, then, intervenes in an intellectual-political context where abolitionists are promoting a new line of thinking about the providentialism of slavery while, in opposition, anti-abolitionists are adapting older arguments to the times.

Cugoano's essay, I argue, makes a significant contribution on both fronts. *Thoughts and Sentiments* begins with a rebuttal of the anti-abolitionist approach to this problem and evolves into a differentiated account of how one can perceive providence at work in and despite the historical omnipresence of slavery and inequality. For Cugoano, the very fact that slavery and inequality are perspicuous to us *as* unjust and expungable is the work of providence; any position arguing the contrary is an 'apostate' 'perversion' of revelation.[14] I will show (I) that Cugoano arrives at this account by dismantling James Tobin's 1785 criticism of James Ramsay.[15] Cugoano thus presents a complex defense of providence that countenances the latest nuances of the proslavery position. On the abolitionist front, *Thoughts and Sentiments* makes two key improvements to the new abolitionist framework (II). First, Cugoano better specifies the apocalyptic danger of the era, which is not just that the wickedness of slavery has taken root in Christian civilizations; it is also that, as a result, the prospect of universalizing the Christian message may be irreparably harmed. Since the telos of Christian salvation history is the creation of a universal Church,[16] it would indeed augur apocalypse if this were

impossible. Secondly and relatedly, Cugoano argues that restitution for the wrong of slavery is impossible by human means alone; the Church will only be created if providence acts in history to correct what human beings alone cannot undo.[17] Cugoano, then, deepens the new abolitionist approach to providence and slavery by tying it to the historical possibility of the Kingdom of God.

I. Defending providence against its anti-abolitionist perversion

Cugoano's primary intellectual opponent in *Thoughts and Sentiments* – in fact the only pro-slavery writer whose arguments Cugoano explicitly treats – is the 'crafty' James Tobin.[18] On behalf of slaveholders in the West Indies, Tobin anonymously published *Cursory Remarks*, an 'artful' criticism of Ramsay's *Essay* combining *ad hominem* attacks on Ramsay and (purportedly) naturalist considerations about the practical impossibility of the *Essay*'s abolitionist proposals.[19] Cugoano opens the main argumentation of *Thoughts and Sentiments* with a defense of Ramsay's character and the cogency of his essay, as well as an attack on the insidious and disingenuous arguments of Tobin.[20] Tobin takes a deflationary approach to defending slavery, suggesting that it is an inexplicable evil that God has left in nature and that its role in providence will likely only be known on Judgment Day: '[S]lavery may perhaps be considered as one of those evils which, like pain, sickness, poverty, etc., were originally interwoven into the constitution of the *present* world, for purposes wholly unknown to its short-sighted inhabitants; and to account for the origin of which, has hitherto baffled our most acute and laborious metaphysicians.'[21] On this basis, Tobin can claim that he is 'against' slavery[22]––much as today's readers are 'against' cancer. As I will argue in this section, Cugoano not only dispatches Tobin's empiricist, deflationary apologetics; he also dispenses with earlier proslavery positions on slavery's compatibility with providence on the way to presenting his own positive conception of how providence appears in the history of slavery.[23]

Prior to the shifts in the political climate of the 1780s, the proslavery lobby relied on a familiar three-pronged strategy to show the compatibility of slavery with providence. First, apologists argued that slavery was natural: the institution has accompanied nearly every society since creation and is tantamount to a law of nature. Consequently, it is not for human beings to disturb the order of creation, but to tend it. Second, they argued that slavery was accommodated, and even sanctified, by scripture and the Mosaic Law.[24] There are instances, like Joshua 9:23, where it seems that God issues a divine command to the Israelites to enslave another people. If God commanded His chosen people to practice slavery, and if it is a natural institution, then slavery cannot be categorically unjust. Third and finally, the proslavery lobby argued that black people were peculiarly suited to slavery because they were naturally inferior: being antisocial and averse to moral and cultural development, they could only be constrained to observe God's laws, whose universal adherence it is a Christian duty to promote. Moreover, the supposed natural inferiority of black people was said to have been established in Biblical history through the 'mark of Cain' and the 'curse of Ham,' lending scriptural credence to the view that blacks' inferiority was part of God's design for nature.[25] On the back of these arguments, proslavery advocates claimed that, despite its sometimes ugly appearances, the enslavement of black people was a mysterious part of God's providential plan for creating a Christian world.

As discussed above, this line of attack had grown problematic by 1784. Recognizing this, Tobin in his *Cursory Remarks* offers substantial revisions of these arguments in support of the narrower position that, although it would be best if slavery could be abolished, this goal is – for all we can tell – impossible. Tobin, indeed, adopts a deflationary, empiricist form of argument that suggests he was influenced by a fellow racist of his time, David Hume. Tobin's approach to the first argument – that slavery is a natural part of God's providential design – is to present Ramsay's understanding of human nature and history as naïve and wishful. Tobin criticizes Ramsay for arguing that the English began the slave trade in Africa when it is well-known that the trade preceded the arrival of Europeans;[26] for claiming that Christianity and liberty always go 'hand in hand;'[27] and for arguing that slavery is unprofitable for the British people when it was an indispensable resource for funding the empire's costly wars.[28] For Tobin, Ramsay's 'warm imagination' prevents him from recognizing that Britain's participation in the African slave trade is historically unexceptional and economically necessary.[29] While this is a regrettable situation, only the 'eccentric' zealot could fail to see that abolition is in flagrant contradiction with history and with prevailing economic circumstances.[30] In this way, Tobin presents the current incapacity to abolish slavery as homologous with previous societies' failures to do so: the frailties of human nature make slavery necessary for meeting basic needs. The 'natural' character of slavery has, then, been recast as a regrettable but unavoidable exigency of human social organization; Ramsay's proposals are naïvely utopian by contrast with the harsh reality. Similarly, Tobin opts for a thinner appeal to scriptures than his proslavery forebears. He simply claims that, by Ramsay's own admission, the Old and New Testaments do not 'abolish' or 'interdict' slavery; it is therefore implausible to infer that Christian morality is categorically against the practice.[31]

Tobin also revises the argument about blacks' natural inferiority. Making no reference to Cain or Ham, he claims that 'experience'[32] furnishes us with the knowledge that black people are constitutionally indolent and unproductive,[33] crude and licentious,[34] cruel,[35] and 'totally averse to the least civilization … as their African forefathers.'[36] Having acquainted himself with communities of free blacks in the colonies, who have had generations of 'intercourse' with French and British people,[37] Tobin assures his readers that nothing in experience suggests that, left to develop freely, they can be productive or norm-conforming members of civilization. One would again have to infer against both past and present evidence to believe, like Ramsay, that black people would be more productive as freemen than slaves.[38] Tobin does not directly conclude from their inferiority, however, that black people *should* be enslaved. Instead, he compares the situation of enslaved black people to that of poor whites. Peasants have harder lives that require them to work thankless jobs ceaselessly, on pain of starvation, debt, or punishment. This permits them, most of the time, none of the comforts of life or the opportunity for moral development. Indeed, they enjoy only a 'nominal' or 'ideal'[39] liberty because of the overweening exigencies of subsistence.[40] Enslaved black people enjoy the benefits of community, more time to rest, regularly provided food and drink, and openness to marriage (including polygamy) and children, all while living in a temperate environment better suited to their corporal nature.[41] Thus, rather than resting on metaphysical commitments or scriptural authority, Tobin appeals to fashionable empiricism to argue that black people – for reasons God only knows – are not naturally

industrious or suited to civilizational norms. This being the case, we should ask what social station is best for them. Since they are incapable of joining the ruling or polite classes of society, they will necessarily be poor laborers. And – given that their productivity is necessary for meeting basic needs – are they better off as slaves or as nominally free peasants like the English poor? Tobin obviously implies the former.

Tobin's deflationary defense of slavery is both narrower and more insidious than predecessors' arguments. Slavery is bad but, for all we know, unavoidable: because of the constraints imposed by human nature and economic demands, a humane, lawfully regulated continuation of black slavery is the best possible course of action for the civilized and uncivilized alike.

Cugoano attacks Tobin's argument at multiple levels, while also criticizing Tobin's less nuanced antecedents. In reconstructing Cugoano's critique, I will attend to the three proslavery arguments outlined above in reverse order. As I reconstruct the text, the logical sequence of Cugoano's response is first to undermine the 'experiential' evidence of black people's inferiority, then to establish that the scriptures *do* categorically prohibit slavery, and then finally to provide an interpretation of inequality that allows Cugoano both to show its providential significance and to distinguish between natural and social (hence avoidable) inequality. This account positions Cugoano to claim that slavery is a social, not natural, inequality; and that not only do Christians have an absolute obligation to end slavery (immediately and totally), but they may also count on providential assistance in the task.[42]

In response to the claim that blacks do not naturally possess the capacities for civilization, Cugoano synthesizes first-personal accounts of his experience in Africa with historical knowledge. He argues that: Africa contains numerous 'kingdoms and principalities,' composed of free subjects, whose governments resemble that of Scottish feudalism;[43] there is an established trade network linking these kingdoms and an established merchant class;[44] kingdoms have laws with gradated scales of punishment;[45] there is mandatory military service that individuals consent to freely and patriotically;[46] and 'freedom and rights are as dear to [Africans], as those privileges are to other people.'[47] Cugoano thus concludes that 'there can be no ignorance, dispersion, or unsociableness so found among [Africans].'[48] Turning to the argument that black people are only suited to being poor laborers, Cugoano has a three-part reply: John Marrant, Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, and his own example contradict the view that Africans cannot be educated members of polite society;[49] furthermore, the experience of slavery is so dehumanizing – where one is made to feel 'equal to [. . .] a cow'[50] – that it stultifies the minds of enslaved people. This invalidates inferring any conclusions about blacks' natures in contexts of slavery.[51] These two claims can also be found in Clarkson; Cugoano, however, emphasizes a third consideration that Clarkson mentions only in passing: having witnessed the wickedness of whites, black people may not wish to imitate their supposedly more learned captors: 'I shall let them enjoy all the advantages of [presumed knowledge] unenvied, as I fear it consists only in greater share of infidelity, and that of a blacker kind than only skin deep.'[52] This point is related to Cugoano's innovations to contemporary abolitionist apocalypticism; in this context, though, it provides another reason why Tobin's racist inferences from 'experience' are 'fallacious.'[53]

Having dismissed the premise that blacks are fit only for hard labor, Cugoano moves to Tobin's claims that slavery is an economic necessity and that slavery is comparatively

better than the 'nominal' liberty enjoyed by poor whites. Against the claim of economic necessity, he argues that (1) slavery is partly responsible for the national debt Tobin is so worried about,[54] (2) that the concentration of wealth in a small class of people leads to greater poverty and exploitation,[55] and (3) that collaborating with Africans to end slavery would lead to more prosperous trading and production than the slave trade permits.[56] Moreover, he argues that the moral urgency of abolition and alleviating unjust wealth inequality outweigh any considerations about the economic costs of redress.[57] As for the preferability of slavery to the 'nominal' liberty of poor whites, Cugoano agrees with Tobin that 'freedom, where people may starve for want, can do them but little good.'[58] Nevertheless, freedom is the priceless mark of human dignity that none could exchange for material security; thus Tobin's comparison rests on an equivocation.[59]

These responses to Tobin's empiricist arguments ground Cugoano's commitment to the practicality and necessity of immediate abolition. Cugoano next turns his attention to the scriptural basis for slavery (despite Tobin's theological circumspection). Henry, Wheelock, and Wheeler have extensively treated the details of Cugoano's argumentation as well as where these depart from Clarkson's treatment of the mark of damnation,[60] so I will confine myself to its upshot: '[T]here is nothing in nature, reason, and scripture can be found, in any manner or way, to warrant the enslaving of black people more than others.'[61]

What is most interesting about Cugoano's biblical exegesis for our purposes, then, is how it responds to Tobin's revision of the first proslavery argument – that slavery and poverty are regrettable forms of natural inequality whose place in providential design we cannot know. Cugoano constructs a three-step argument in response to this. First, he distinguishes between natural and social inequality and claims that providence can be perceived differently in each type. Second, he shows that the scriptures, in accord with 18th-century natural science, treat 'complexion' as an 'innocent'[62] form of natural variety and 'lawful servitude'[63] as a natural – albeit historically variable[64] – inequality. The scriptures *also* demonstrate, crucially, that slavery is a contingent social inequality. Third, Cugoano argues that the providential meaning of natural variety and inequality consists in disclosing God's power over sin, so that we may trust that eventually all injustice will be overcome; whereas the providential meaning of slavery is that, with God's assistance, it is within human power to keep this sinful institution – along, indeed, with all social inequalities – 'in subjection' so that it is entirely 'removed.'[65]

To unpack these three steps, let us examine one of the essay's most important conclusions: And, therefore, any thing which had a seeming appearance in favour of slavery [in scriptures] … was to shew that it was not natural and innocent, like that of different colours among men … [but rather] was to shew that every thing of any evil appearance of it was to be removed.[66] Here, Cugoano not only clearly distinguishes between natural variety and institutionalized inequality, but also ascribes contingency to the latter and necessity to the former. Natural differences cannot be changed both because they are causal products of identifiable natural processes[67] and because they are indispensable means by which God reveals to humanity its sinfulness, His law, and the guarantee of salvation.[68] Had God not admitted distinctions such as rich and poor, weak and strong, or black and white into creation, it would have been impossible 'to convey wisdom to the fallen apostate human race,'[69] which requires the full scope of nature's differentiation to understand its fallenness and God's might and will.[70]

A different etiology, though, pertains to social inequalities like slavery. Though God established 'lawful servitude' to redress natural inequalities like resource distribution, as soon as 'the laws of civilization were broken,' a 'compulsive servitude' emerged, whose sole provenance is 'robbery' and 'sin amongst men.'[71] It is *this* unjust form of servitude, slavery, that it 'was necessary … [to admit into Moses'] ritual law for a figurative use.'[72] For 'unless it had been admitted into the … law,' human beings would take the universality of oppression to be natural and inescapable; 'but by what is instituted in the law … we are thereby represented as Israel to have dominion over sin, and to rule over and keep in subjection all our spiritual enemies.'[73] Hence, the Exodus commandment to conscript the Canaanites – which ostensibly sanctifies slavery[74] – is actually, in the light of Christ's fulfilled revelation of the law, an identification of slavery as a contingent social inequality that must be abolished: '[T]here is now nothing remaining in the law … but the ever abiding obligations … of moral rectitude, justice, equity and righteousness;'[75] 'what was intended by [the ritual law] is fulfilled, and in no respect … can be repeated again.'[76]

In response to Tobin's revisionist defense of slavery, then, Cugoano develops a sophisticated, multi-level account of how we *can* identify providence at work in the long history of oppression. Countering 'experiential' inferences about black inferiority and the naturalness of slavery, he shows that by relying on reason and scripture, we can distinguish between natural and social inequalities and see providence's hand in both. Providence uses natural differences to allow us to recognize our innate sinfulness and need for divine redemption, and it discloses social inequalities as contingent products of sin that we are commanded and assisted by God to eliminate. Hence, Cugoano shows that, in inductively linking the historical permanence of slavery with the current impossibility of abolition, Tobin elides the distinction between natural and social inequality in order to present injustice as if it were God's will. Slavery, however, is a social inequality; thus, proslavery writers' attempt to present it as a natural, if enigmatic, feature of providence is a 'perversion' of 'reason' and 'sacred writings.'[77]

But in what way does divine assistance in abolishing slavery appear, and how should we understand, from a providential perspective, the fact that Christian nations have attained to an historically 'unparalleled wickedness?'[78] It is at this point of *Thoughts and Sentiments* that Cugoano turns to and innovates contemporary abolitionist arguments.

II. The problem of providence in abolitionist arguments

Cugoano's innovative approach to the problem of providence can best be discerned in conversation with three of the most prominent abolitionists of the time (all cited in *Thoughts and Sentiments*): Anthony Benezet, Granville Sharp, and Thomas Clarkson. Benezet introduced three new trends into late 18th-century abolitionist thought. First, as Swaminathan argues, he begins to impute *collective* responsibility to the British nation for slavery.[79] In his *Short Account*, he suggests that by countenancing slavery, Christians – who 'have been peculiarly favored with the light of the gospel' – are thereby 'refus[ing] or neglect[ing] the offers of this great salvation.'[80] Then, in his most successful essay of 1766, Benezet makes this collective imputation explicit: 'If indeed we [believe in the truths of the Gospel], must we not tremble to think what a load of guilt lies upon our nation generally and individually, so far as we in any degree abet or countenance this aggravated

iniquity [of slavery]?'[81] Now the entire British nation, regarded as a collective subject composed of all its citizens, is subject to the divine punishments promised in the Gospels even for tolerating slavery.

Benezet inaugurates a second trend in his judgment of slavery's evil: not only is slavery 'the most abominable and dreadful scene … perhaps ever acted upon the face of the earth,' but it is also perpetrated by Christians, who have a greater knowledge of God's revealed law than any prior enslavers.[82] Given both the scope of the crime and its perpetrators' capacity to appreciate its wrongness, Benezet suggests, the modern slave trade may be the greatest sin in history. This emphasis on the singular evil of slavery is novel and influential. The third trend emerging from Benezet's work is the threat of divine retribution on Britain in this life. Referring to Biblical history and to an account of 12th-century Irish history, Benezet suggests at the end of his 1766 *A caution and warning* that God punishes those who practice slavery by reducing them 'to the same state of slavery' – with their captors often the same people whom they had held in bondage.[83]

Granville Sharp, an Anglican lawmaker in correspondence with Benezet,[84] significantly develops these trends and becomes the first to make divine retribution against the nation a central feature of abolitionist thinking. Inheriting the idea of national responsibility and guilt, Sharp's 1769 *A Representation* claims that it would be better had British 'dominions' 'never existed' than for Great Britain to be 'loaded with the horrid guilt of [slavery's] abominable wickedness.'[85] In his 1772 'Appendix' to this essay, Sharp argues that one can already perceive God's punishment of Britain at work in the gradual erosion of English Common Law. In passing or interpreting laws that justify slavery – in direct contradiction with the law's goal of preserving liberty and rights – Britain 'must inevitably introduce by degrees a Toleration of the East India Slavery, with all its *direful consequences*,' which 'will certainly cause our measure of Iniquity to overflow, and, in all probability, draw down upon us some dreadful and speedy *national* calamity.'[86] Referring to the same history of Ireland as Benezet, Sharp argues that Britain itself will be enslaved if it continues to tolerate slavery. Sharp thus sees providence at work in Britain's legal and moral decline: the erosion of constitutional principles and divine punishment are one and the same.

In Sharp's most famous essay, *The Law of Retribution* (1776), he presents a comprehensive reading of scriptures prosecuting the case that providence acts in history as 'the Almighty Deliverer from slavery' by 'recompensing [slavers'] 'own way' upon their heads.'[87] The 'law of retribution,' then, explains the fall of powerful nations into captivity (such as Egypt, Babylon, Canaan, and Israel) as punishment for having enslaved other peoples. Expanding on Benezet, Sharp claims more ambitiously that temporal divine retribution against slavery is a providential *law* whose necessity Britain ignores at its own peril. This interpretation of biblical history permits him to read the phenomena of imperial decline in his day both as signs that divine punishment was already upon Britain and as harbingers of an even more decisive national calamity, through which Britain would fall into captivity and ignorance. Sharp refers to Britain's economic struggles, sea voyage disasters, slave insurrections, its wars in the colonies tending to 'mutual' 'destruction,'[88] and the prospect of being conquered by a more powerful nation. Indeed, to illustrate Great Britain's 'infinite guilt,'[89] Sharp constructs an extended argument by analogy with the Jewish people. While Sharp is persuaded that the history of every nation illustrates the law of retribution,[90] he claims that the history of

the Jewish people represents its most exemplary case. As with the Christians, so with the Jews, 'the Knowledge of the *Divine Law* was revealed in a more particular manner to *that People*, and to others *only through them*, so the effect even of their Disobedience was an exemplary demonstration, from time to time, of *God's Vengeance*, as well as of *his Mercy*, for the instruction of all other Nations.'[91] And what God revealed through Israel, above all, is that he is 'the Almighty Deliverer from *Slavery*'[92] and that '*God's severe Vengeance against Slave-holders* [...] ought to be had in everlasting remembrance' and as a warning.[93]

The Jewish and Christian peoples, because of the gift of revelation, are tasked with a greater responsibility to keep the law sacred. Like the Jews, Christians underwent a long period of extreme hardship and oppression from which they were liberated by God. Upon liberation, each of these peoples was blessed for a time with immense prosperity and influence over other nations. '[B]ut alas!,' writes Sharp, the Jews rejected revelation, and they have now been dispersed among other nations and have even become minoritarian in relation to Christian cultures, arguing that the Israelites have been scattered among 'all other Nations' 'as living monuments' of the law of God's vengeance and mercy.[94]

However, Sharp continues, if Israel inevitably had to fall due to its neglect of God's concern for the oppressed, how much worse will the divine retribution against the British nation be? For not only have Christians been given the command through which '*all Law is fulfilled*'—'Thou shalt love thy Neighbour as thyself' – but they have breached divine law more than the Jews ever did.[95] Sharp writes: 'Great Britain and her Colonies are infinitely more guilty than the [Jewish] People.'[96] He thus concurs with Benezet's judgment of the singularly evil character of modern slavery. By dint of the analogy with Jewish history, Sharp infers that the British nation, and all of the slavery-tolerating, 'enlightened' nations of Europe – unless they enact abolition and repent – will meet with a punishment at least as severe as that suffered by the Israelites and become the most stunning exemplification of the law of retribution.[97]

Sharp, then, synthesizes the three trends introduced by Benezet into an account of how providence acts in history to abolish slavery. The effect is a construal of the British national subject as an evil, decadent nation at mortal risk of a fate worse than the Jewish diaspora. Thomas Clarkson, ten years after the *Law of Retribution*, expands two features of Sharp's argumentation in his *Essay*'s final pages. Whereas Sharp's argument for intratemporal retribution is primarily based on scriptural exegesis, Clarkson claims that because 'body politic[s]' only exist in this world, they can only be punished in this world.[98] Furthermore, he attributes Britain's recent susceptibility to natural disasters, colonial losses, and military defeats to France to its majority share in slavery commerce.[99]

Benezet, Sharp, and Clarkson thus elaborate an alternative abolitionist account of how slavery and providence are related. This account is scripturally grounded, providing a unified interpretation of both the Old and New Testaments. It allows abolitionists to refer contemporary phenomena of moral, economic, and political atrophy to a providential design. Furthermore, it provides a moral and religious ground for judging Britain, along with other imperial Christian nations, to be the evilest permutation of slaveholders in providential history. This is a powerful theory of providence that helped to change the frame of the debate so that the public could see abolition as a moral obligation, regardless of its political or economic costs.[100]

Cugoano inherits this argument in *Thoughts and Sentiments*. Like Clarkson, he enumerates numerous decline phenomena (at least seven) as 'tokens of God's judgments against the British Empire;'[101] and, synthesizing these observations with Sharp's analysis of British constitutional erosion,[102] Cugoano claims that Britain is becoming 'as truly barbarous and brutish as the unlearned [nations].'[103] For Cugoano, proslavery arguments that British citizens experience worse oppression than slaves, despite their fallaciousness, in fact drive home the abolitionist account of providence: domination and unfreedom are being 'recompensed' upon Britain's own head, forcing its people into abject conditions of servitude.[104] Reproducing passages from both Sharp and Clarkson, he agrees that providence administers the law of retribution and that every British person is guilty of the evil of slavery 'unless he . . . declare himself against it.'[105]

Beyond these amplifications of Sharp and Clarkson's account of providence's role in abolition, however, Cugoano innovates it in two key respects. He tends to agree with this tradition's diagnosis of modern slavery as a crime of 'unparalleled wickedness;'[106] however, he more seriously considers the possibility that this sin and other signs of the times augur the Apocalypse. The principal basis of Cugoano's eschatological prophesying is his perception that the slave trade has potentially undermined the historical prospect of forming a universal Christian church. As a Christian committed to the idea that the Kingdom of God is history's telos, Cugoano is deeply troubled by the thought that the attempted universalization of Christianity through empire has so far miscarried that it has possibly *prevented* the religion's universalization. (Sharp, by contrast, does not consider this possibility. Interpreting history *only* through the law of retribution seems to preempt him from asking whether the 'unparalleled wickedness' of slavery requires providential intervention *above and beyond* divine punishment.)

Referring, in the eschatological rhetoric of the jeremiad, to the Islamic empires and Christian Europe as the eastern and western 'horns' of the Antichrist,[107] Cugoano repeatedly returns to the contradiction between Christian revelation and the reality of slavery. He writes that it 'should be expected' that 'in a Christian aera,'[108] 'wherever a Christian government is extended, and the true religion is embraced, that the blessing of liberty should be extended likewise . . . with exuberant blessings.'[109] Instead, however, Christian empires are not only giving rise to 'a powerful luxuriance in wickedness' that is leading to decline both abroad and at home;[110] further, the misuse of Christian principles and scriptures to justify slavery means that there is 'little hope of any good proposals meeting with success anywhere' and that 'multitudes of nations' are 'revolting away' from the 'standard of truth.'[111] Through its perverse alliance with the evil of slavery, then, the prospect of making the world Christian – in other words, of establishing the church – is threatened to its core. This problem, I reiterate, is a primary reason why Cugoano dwells on the Apocalyptic interpretation of slavery longer than his abolitionist forebears. Since the 'grand duty of all Christian men' is 'to diffuse knowledge and instruction to all the heathen nations,'[112] it would indeed be Apocalyptic if 'the only true religion'[113] had been so corrupted by its anti-Christian perversion that one could no longer hope to promote it among the unconverted.[114]

These considerations about the possible miscarriage of the Church's historical mission naturally segue to Cugoano's second innovation of the abolitionist account of providence. Cugoano asks himself something like the following question: *If the Kingdom of God can still, somehow, be realized in time, how would providence go about restoring its*

historical possibility? Cugoano's response to this question involves a novel emphasis on God's assistance in making reparations and seeking forgiveness for wrongs to the slain that cannot be undone.[115]

Unlike Sharp and Clarkson, Cugoano does not stop at calling for abolition and British repentance. Reflecting on the failures of the Sierra Leone project, Cugoano considers at the end of *Thoughts and Sentiments* how the British people might seek forgiveness from Africans, earn their trust, and recommence the project of establishing a universal Christian community.[116] To be sure, these are geopolitical considerations about possible cooperation between Africans and the British. However, they are also, just as crucially, providential questions about the prospects of a Christian world and God's assistance in healing the wounds that the British have inflicted on black people. For, indeed, 'the great sadness of [black people's] misery and woe . . . can only be distinctly known to [God]'[117] and '*cannot be fully restored*.'[118]

The abolitionist account of providence, therefore, must not only address the punishment of the guilty. This would indeed be insufficient, Cugoano reasons, for there must also be restitution for the victims. Only in this way can it be hoped that the singular, 'anti-Christian' evil of slavery might be healed by the growth of Christianity.

This context explains why Cugoano's *first* policy proposal – even before his call for immediate and total abolition – is the institution of 'days of mourning and fasting . . . that you might seek grace and repentance, and find mercy and forgiveness before God Omnipotent; and that he may give you wisdom and understanding to devise what ought to be done.'[119] It is beyond human capacities alone to rectify the evil and suffering caused by slavery; only with earnest national repentance and providential guidance can the British hope to make restitution, abolish slavery while ensuring justice and enfranchisement for black people,[120] spread Christian and liberal principles,[121] encourage the prosperity and freedom of Africa,[122] and enforce an international prohibition of slavery.[123] Wheelock, Sandiford, and Gunn have each commented on the unsatisfactory and insufficiently radical character of Cugoano's proposals at the end of *Thoughts and Sentiments*.[124] This may well be a fair criticism, but it is important to bear in mind that these proposals are offered tentatively[125] precisely *because* they accompany the claim that in lieu of the possibility of full restitution, human beings must seek divine guidance. In contrast to the scholars just mentioned, Adam Dahl has accented the radicalism of Cugoano's political proposals in the abolitionist tradition. He argues that Cugoano's 'anti-gradualism' and his positing of a universal, transnational duty to achieve an immediate end to slavery worldwide are novel. Indeed, according to Dahl's interpretation, Britain must take a leading role in realizing this cosmopolitan duty if it is to atone for its role in the institution of slavery.[126] I agree with Dahl's assessment on the whole – although Cugoano does include in his proposal for total abolition that emancipated slaves ought to remain as 'lawful' servants for seven years until they have displayed 'suitable progress in knowledge [of Christianity]' and 'behaved themselves honestly.'[127] It is hard to fault Wheelock, Sandiford, and Gunn for balking at such paternalism.[128] This caveat notwithstanding, Cugoano's commitment to providential guidance in recommencing the project of building the Church is not only compatible with his anti-gradualism and universalism; this theological commitment is an explicit motivation of his political radicalism. For every moment that Christendom tolerates or supports the

'Antichristian unlawfulness of the slavery and commerce of the human species'[129] threatens to undermine the possibility of a universal Christian community. Moreover, in the same paragraph in which Cugoano makes his proposal for immediate and total abolition, he argues that emancipated Africans should not only be provided a Christian education in exchange for their labor, but that those competent for the task should be provided passage to Africa to restart the Christian education of the continent.[130] These textual circumstances indicate the close link between Cugoano's political and theological radicalism.

With these innovations of the abolitionist discourse, Cugoano arrives at the most sophisticated providential account of slavery of his time. Addressing the cynical, naturalist arguments of the proslavery lobby, he shows how providence allows us to perceive the history of slavery and oppression as a social, rather than natural, inequality. Then, inheriting the inspired arguments of Benezet, Sharp, and Clarkson, Cugoano innovates abolitionist providentialism by probing more deeply into the crisis that slavery's 'unparalleled' – and irreversible – wickedness represents for Christianity. Cugoano remembered better than his forebears that, ultimately, providence is less concerned with punishing the sinful than it is saving the weak, the suffering, and the dead.

Conclusion

This article has presented a sustained reconstruction of *Thoughts and Sentiments* as a response to the problem of divine providence's relationship to slavery. I have argued that, if we take our author at his word, Cugoano's essay is meant to be a religiously-anchored abolitionist argument. Moreover, I hope to have demonstrated that by focusing on the problem of providence in *Thoughts and Sentiments*, we can best recognize Cugoano's innovative and subtle responses to the latest proslavery and abolitionist arguments. By my lights, Cugoano develops the most profound providential reflection on slavery of his day.

Notes

1. Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments*, 73.
2. Ibid., 11.
3. "The Nature of Servitude as Admitted by the Law of God, Compared to the Modern Slavery of the Africans in the West-Indies, In an Answer to the Advocates for Slavery and Oppression." Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments*, 116.
4. Bogues, "The Political Thought of Quobna Cugoano," 32; Hole, "From Sentiment to Security," 180; Peters, "The Anti-Imperialism of Ottobah Cugoano," 74; and Dahl, "Creolizing Natural Liberty," 908–20.
5. Gunn, "Creating a Paradox," 631; Wheeler, *The Complexion of Race*.
6. For other arguments advocating for the centrality of religion to Cugoano's thought, see: Bernasconi, "Ottobah Cugoano's Place in the History of Political Philosophy," 25–42; Wheelock, *Barbaric Culture and Black Critique*. esp. 25–6, 35. Christopher Brown also suggests a connection between Cugoano's "immediatism" and his renewal of theologically-informed critique. Brown, *Moral Capital*, 297–8. See also Henry, "Between Hume and Cugoano," 143. For a recent (albeit quite speculative) argument that Cugoano invents a "Black Calvinism" that anticipates contemporary Afropessimist themes, see Stewart, "Cugoano and the Hermeneutics of Black Calvinism," 629–59.

7. Wheelock, *Barbaric Culture and Black Critique*, 54; Henry, "Between Hume and Cugoano," 143–5.
8. Wheelock, *Barbaric Culture and Black Critique*, 40, 53.
9. See Pinn, *Why Lord?*; Wheelock, *Barbaric Culture and Black Critique*; Wheeler, *The Complexion of Race*.
10. Ramsay, *An Essay on the Treatment*.
11. Brown, *Moral Capital*, 370–72.
12. Benezet, *The Complete Antislavery Writings of Anthony Benezet, 1754–1783*; Clarkson, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species Particularly the African*; and Sharp, *The Law of Retribution*.
13. See Swaminathan, *Debating the Slave Trade*, 83–125.
14. Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments*, 67.
15. Tobin, *Cursory Remarks upon the Reverend Mr. Ramsay's Essay on the Treatment*. Tobin is the only "proslavery" writer whose arguments Cugoano addresses directly in the essay, although he quotes Turnbull at the essay's conclusion: see Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments*, 109.
16. Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments*, 107.
17. Ibid., 98–100.
18. Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments*, 20. Cugoano's critical discussion of the text of the "Cursory Remarker" can be found (17–22). See also note 15 above.
19. Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments*, 17.
20. "But, to return to my subject, I begin with the Cursory Remarker" (Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments*, 18). In an excellent article, Aminah Hasan-Birdwell has also argued that Cugoano's text needs to be contextualized as a response to Tobin. See Hasan-Birdwell, "Ottobah Cugoano on chattel slavery and the moral limitations of *ius gentium*," 473–95. See especially 475–6.
21. Tobin, *Cursory Remarks*, 7.
22. Ibid., 5; see note 19 above.
23. For previous treatments of Tobin in connection with Cugoano, see Brown, *Moral Capital*, 367–70, and especially Wheelock, *Barbaric Culture and Black Critique*, 33–5.
24. Defenders of slavery referred to Exodus, Joshua, and Ephesians, among other books of the Bible where slavery and/or servitude seem to be tolerated.
25. For a discussion of how these events came to signify black people's natural inferiority, see Goldenberg, *Black and Slave*.
26. Tobin, *Cursory Remarks*, 16–7.
27. Ibid., 13.
28. Ibid., 10.
29. Ibid., 20.
30. Ibid., 20.
31. Ibid., 8.
32. Ibid., 122.
33. Ibid., 116–21.
34. Ibid., 92–3, 122.
35. Ibid., 121.
36. Ibid., 122.
37. Ibid., 122.
38. Ibid., 116.
39. Ibid., 92. See Wheelock, Barbaric Culture and Black Critiq*ue*, 34.
40. Tobin, *Cursory Remarks*, 58–61, 65–6, 85–92.
41. Ibid., 92–9.
42. For an indispensable article on Cugoano's arguments for immediate and total abolition, see Dahl, "Creolizing".
43. Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments*, 25.
44. Ibid., 26.

45. Ibid., 26.
46. Ibid., 27.
47. Ibid., 28.
48. Ibid., 23.
49. Ibid., 16, 23–4. See Clarkson, *An Essay*, 182–7; see also Marrant, *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black*, 110–33; Gronniosaw, *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw*, 32–58.
50. Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments*, 22.
51. Ibid., 22, 91; see Clarkson, *An Essay*, 177.
52. Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments*, 12; for other expressions of distrust in the "advantages" of European culture, see 90–1, 104, 107. See Clarkson, *An Essay*, 249.
53. Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments*, 18.
54. Ibid., 68–70.
55. Ibid, 69.
56. Ibid., 100–1. On Cugoano's critique of imperialist economics, see Shanafelt, "'A World of Debt'," 21–43; Peters, "Anti-Imperialism of Ottobah Cugoano"; Dahl, "Creolizing"; Gunn, "Creating a Paradox".
57. Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments*, 20, 95, 103–4.
58. Ibid., 103. For Cugoano's discussion of how equitable wealth distribution in Africa allows its peoples to enjoy more "real liberties" than many Britons, see 103–4.
59. Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments*, 20. See also Clarkson, *An Essay*, 224–41.
60. See Henry, "Between Hume and Cugoano, 143–6"; Wheelock, *Barbaric Culture and Black Critique*, 35–45; Wheeler, "Betrayed," 29–31.
61. Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments*, 47.
62. Ibid., 31.
63. Ibid., 34.
64. Ibid., 35.
65. Ibid., 42–3.
66. Ibid., 43.
67. See Cugoano's discussion of the climactic conditions and accidents of descent producing the variety of complexions: Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments*, 28–9, 32.
68. See Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments*, 38–42.
69. Ibid., 39.
70. Ibid., 38–9.
71. Ibid., 34; except for "sin amongst men," which is from 42.
72. Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments*, 42.
73. Ibid., 42–3.
74. Ibid., 46.
75. Ibid., 43.
76. Ibid., 47.
77. Ibid., 29.
78. Ibid., 61.
79. See Swaminathan, *Debating the Slave Trade*, 68–82.
80. Benezet, *The Complete Antislavery Writings*, 29.
81. Ibid., 106.
82. Ibid., 95.
83. qtd. in Benezet, Anthony, 106.
84. See Swaminathan, *Debating the Slave Trade*, 73.
85. Sharp, *A Representation of the Injustice and Dangerous Tendency*, 72.
86. Sharp, An Appendix to *The Representation*, 27–8.
87. Sharp, *The Law of Retribution*, 309–10.
88. Ibid., 256.
89. Ibid., 23.
90. Ibid., 11.

91. Ibid.
92. Ibid., 18.
93. Ibid., 13.
94. See note 90 above.
95. Ibid., See also: Sharp, *Law of Retribution*, 305.
96. See note 89 above.
97. See note 87 above.
98. Clarkson, *An Essay*, 256.
99. Ibid., 257–8.
100. See Swaminathan, *Debating the Slave Trade*, 73–82; see Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments*, 81.
101. Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments*, 78.
102. Ibid., 70.
103. Ibid., 73.
104. Ibid., 68–71.
105. Ibid., 79, 60.
106. Ibid., 61.
107. Ibid., 92–3. For other references to Britain and/or Christian Europe as the Antichrist, see Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments*, 67, 108. For discussion of Cugoano in connection with the tradition of the jeremiad, see Henry, "Between Hume and Cugoano"; Wheelock, *Barbaric Culture and Black Critique*, 27; Dahl, "Creolizing Natural Liberty," 911–2; Wheeler, "Betrayed," 17, 22.
108. Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments*, 24.
109. Ibid., 92.
110. Ibid., 25.
111. Ibid., 107.
112. Ibid.
113. Ibid., 67.
114. I would like to underscore that it is not so much the *existence* of Apocalyptic images and themes in Cugoano's text that distinguishes its arguments from Sharp, Benezet, or Ramsay's abolitionist writings. Such motifs undeniably appear in the essays of Cugoano's contemporaries. What *is* distinctive, I am claiming, is Cugoano's emphasis on the threat that modern slavery poses to the idea of Christian providence. He considers a possibility that appears only dimly to these other authors: slavery, and the perversion of the Christian religion, may have undermined the possibility of achieving the Kingdom of God in historical time. This possibility may have been clearer to Cugoano for a couple of reasons. One, as an Afro-British Christian and an emancipated slave, he was likely much more acquainted with the profound obstacles facing the future conversion of the victims of European imperialism. Two, for my part at least, I believe that Cugoano was a subtler theologian than his abolitionist comrades. His eye was trained more steadily on the theological problem of providence. I thank the comments of an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to make clearer what is distinctive about Cugoano's Apocalypticism.
115. Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments*, 102.
116. Ibid., 104–6.
117. Ibid., 16.
118. Ibid., 102, emphasis mine.
119. Ibid., 98.
120. Ibid., 98–100.
121. Ibid., 107–8.
122. Ibid., 100–1.
123. Ibid., 100.
124. Wheelock, *Barbaric Culture and Black Critique*, 55–8; Sandiford, *Measuring the Moment*; Gunn, "Creating a Paradox," 651.
125. See note 119 above.

126. Dahl, "Creolizing," 909–12.
127. Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments*, 98–9. It is also worth noting that the limitation of seven years of servitude is the same limitation specified in Exodus.
128. See Hasan-Birdwell, "Cugoano on chattel slavery," 482–92, however, for a defense of Cugoano's concept of lawful servitude. Hasan-Birdwell compellingly argues that Cugoano's is a much thicker understanding of the moral requirements of servitude compared to rival accounts in the *ius gentium* or natural law tradition.
129. See note 119 above.
130. Ibid., 99.

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