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ROBERT HALL
AND THE BRISTOL SLAVE-TRADE DEBATE
OF 1787-1788

Shortly after Robert Hall's return to King's College, Aberdeen, in November 1783 to start his third year of study, he received an invitation from the church at Broadmead, Bristol, to become assistant pastor, which he accepted, taking a six-month break from school before returning to finish in 1785. Olinthus Gregory writes in his Memoir of Hall that upon graduation Hall (1764-1831) 'had become rich in literary, intellectual, and biblical acquisition' (6.16). As he commenced his labours in August 1785 as assistant pastor at Broadmead to Caleb Evans, his former mentor, and as classical tutor at the Baptist Academy, replacing the ailing James Newton, Hall's preaching and teaching attracted much attention; unfortunately, not all of it was good. Some thought he was defective in certain areas of theology and that 'in his preaching he dealt too much in generalities, or enlarged upon topics, which, though in a certain sense noble and inspiring, and thus calculated to elevate the mind, did not immediately flow from the great scheme of redemption' (Gregory 6.17). Even Andrew Fuller and John Ryland, Jr., expressed concerns in their diaries about young Hall at this time (Gregory 6.18-21). One thing everyone agreed upon, however, was that by 1785 Hall was already a dynamic preacher and brilliant scholar whose rhetorical, oratorical and conversational skills were the equal of anyone they had ever heard. As a tribute to his ability and character, Hall would sustain that level of acclaim throughout his public career.

Before 1788 Hall's presence was, as one would expect, primarily felt in the pulpit. The results of his pen included two circular letters for the Western Association of Baptists (in 1784 and 1787), and a short piece, 'Reverie', which had appeared in a provincial newspaper in 1787 under the pseudonym Leptos, published by Hall's friends, not by Hall himself (Morris 34). Joseph Hughes (1769-1833) sheds some insight into Hall's reluctance at this time to address the public in print. In 1787 Hughes was an eighteen-year-old student from London in his final year at Bristol Baptist College; the next year he would follow in Hall's footsteps and pursue further studies at Aberdeen, eventually becoming pastor of the Baptist congregation at Battersea, as well as Secretary of both the British and Foreign Bible Society and the Religious Tract Society. Joseph Leifchild, in his Memoir of Hughes (1835), records Hughes as saying,

Before quitting Bristol for Scotland I enjoyed the advantage of hearing, as the assistant of Dr Evans, Robert Hall, who also took part in the tuition of the

students. The genius and attainments of the last individual would be ill portrayed by me. They command admiration wherever he is known; and if his pen had been as busy as his mind is capacious, ardent and sublime, they would have commanded the admiration of distant ages. No one before I listened to him had translated the classics in my hearing with equal grace and [Pg. 212] spirit: no one had given me such an impression of intellectual nature. But he seems never to have formed the same lofty estimate of himself as he must have known that all his acquaintance held most tenaciously. The paucity of his publications must be ascribed to this cause. On what subject, he has substantially said, can you recommend me to write, on which better things have not already appeared than it is in my power to produce! (37-38)

The subject that would finally bring Hall into the public arena of political discourse where, despite his self-deprecation, he would remain a prominent figure most of his life, was the hotly-contested issue of the slave-trade, a topic of particular concern to the citizens of Bristol in 1787-8. The arrival of Thomas Clarkson in June 1787 did much to galvanize support and opposition to the idea of abolishing or severely restricting the slave-trade. After helping to form the first Committee for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave-trade in London in June 1787, Clarkson departed for Bristol, at that time one of the leading seaports in England involved in that trade. Some of the most prominent business, clerical and political figures in Bristol benefited, either directly or indirectly, from the profits of this trade (Latimer 2.472-3). They scarcely welcomed Clarkson's arrival, or appreciated his efforts or that of the newly formed Committee in London in seeking to abolish the slave-trade. Numerous ministers and parishioners in Bristol, however, both from Dissenting congregations and the Established Church, were taking, in most cases for the first time, clear positions against the continuation of trafficking in human cargo. News of Clarkson's efforts in London had preceded him, and his supporters welcomed him with much applause. Clarkson, however, had come not just to help establish another Committee, but also to see first-hand the work of the slave-trade and to gather information from any sailor or slave he could find who had participated in sea voyages to Africa and the West Indies. He visited Bristol several times that summer and recorded many accounts of the slave-trade that he would later send to representatives of Parliament and which eventually formed part of his famous work, *The History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament* (1808). Before leaving Bristol in August 1787, he wrote,

The next attempt was to lay the foundation of a committee in Bristol, and of a petition to Parliament from it for the abolition of the Slave-trade. I had now made many friends. A gentleman of the name of Payntor had felt himself much interested in my labour. Mr Joseph Harford, a man of fortune, of great respectability of character, and of considerable influence, had attached himself to the cause. Dr Fox had assisted me in it. Mr Hughes, a clergyman of the Baptist church, was anxious and ready to serve it. Dr Camplin, of the Establishment, with several of his friends, continued steady. Matthew Wright, James Harford, Truman Harford, and all the Quakers to a man, were strenuous, and this on the best of principles, in its support. To all these I spoke, and I had the pleasure of seeing that my wishes were likely in a short time to be gratified in both these cases. (1:366-7) [Pg 213]

Clarkson was correct in that regard, for during the autumn of 1787 the work of those committed to abolishing the slave-trade in England moved steadily ahead, despite continued opposition within the mercantile interests and Parliament. By late December the formation of committees outside London had gained considerable momentum. A notice written by Thomas Walker, Chairman of 'the Society for the purpose of effecting the Abolition of the SLAVE TRADE' recently formed in Manchester on 27 December, appeared in the *Bristol Gazette* for 10 January 1788, denouncing the slave-trade as 'a direct violation of the precepts of true religion; in opposition to the principles of liberty, justice, and humanity; and disgraceful in the extreme to every country by which it is encouraged, or even tolerated'. As with the London committee, the Manchester committee's primary end was to educate the public and sway opinion so as 'to procure the general and final abolition of the African Slave Trade ...'. On 15 January 1788 a letter published by Granville Sharp, Chairman of the London 'Committee of the Society instituted for the purpose of effecting the Abolition of the Slave-Trade', boasted that the 'Clergy of the Established Church, and the Ministers amongst the Dissenters', as well as 'Members of both Universities', together with 'the spirited exertions of Manchester, Birmingham, and other principal manufacturing towns [such as Bristol], afford ground to hope that a species of oppression, so disgraceful to the nation, will at length be abolished by general consent (*Bristol Gazette*, 7 February 1788).

As a result of this momentum, it is not surprising that the *Bristol Gazette* for 24 January 1788 noted with 'heartfelt pleasure' that a 'general meeting of the Citizens of Bristol' had been requested by the Mayor for the next Monday, 28 January, at the Guildhall,

to take into consideration the most fit and wholesome measures for the total abolition of the Slave Trade. ... We have also the pleasure to inform our readers, that this desirable cause is already taken up by several respectable gentlemen of this city, and we sincerely wish their laudable design may be carried into effect. --- As there are few who attempt to justify this traffick, beside those who are immediately interested therein, it is expected the meeting will be attended by all those who are advocates for freedom and compassion; and it is to be hoped that all such gentlemen as have reasons to allege on behalf of the Slave Trade, will there come forward and avow such reasons, that the subject may have a fair discussion. --- We cannot withhold our most sanguine wishes for the success of every undertaking which comprehends the present and future interests of mankind, and is intended to diffuse that liberty which as Englishmen is our boasted enjoyment.

Supporters were quick to praise the efforts of those involved in finally calling for a public meeting. One writer to the *Bristol Gazette* for 24 January 1788 regretted that 'Our city has, it must be confessed, been stained with the guilt of this inhuman commerce. But I am happy to find we have still virtue enough left amongst us to wipe off the foul blot which has too long disgraced us'. He noted that 'Our Chief [Pg. 214] Magistrate nobly takes the lead in this generous undertaking. The Dignitaries of the Church, the Clergy of every denomination, the Citizens of all ranks seem eager to testify their abhorrence of this iniquitous business, and to manifest to all the world, that however different their sentiments may be on other and lesser matters, in the great cause of humanity and the

honor of that common religion we profess, we have but one sentiment and are all most cordially united.'

The public meeting was held on 28 January, a committee formed, and a petition drawn up to be sent to Parliament requesting the abolition of the slave-trade; all of which continued to generate much discussion throughout Bristol for several months, both in private conversations and in numerous strident letters to the local newspapers. In the next issue of the *Bristol Gazette* (31 January) a local merchant responded, 'if our Parliament could be induced to make a law to abolish this trade, I would ask the promoters of that measure, What is to become of the many thousand manufacturers now employed by it, and of the tradesmen that employ them?' To this writer, the committee in London and the group in Bristol were little more than 'Fanatics and Bigots who, neglecting their own affairs, grow wild in matters that don't concern them, whereof they are wholly ignorant, and which so far as I perceive is the case here [Bristol], as the most active appear wholly unacquainted with the subject, and form opinions from ridiculous [*sic*] and false informations'. In that same issue another local merchant contended that the opinions of those at the meeting had no validity because none of them 'has a foot of land, or is possessed of any property in our West-India islands'. They are, he argued, 'very worthy men who I believe mean well', but they are 'totally unacquainted with the nature and importance of the trade they wish to suppress...'

In the midst of such contention over what to the merchants was primarily an economic concern but to their opponents was one of the supreme moral issues of the day, Robert Hall could remain silent no longer. He wrote in a letter to his father, dated 10 February 1788:

A petition has been sent from hence [Bristol] to Parliament for the abolishing it [the slave-trade]; and a committee is formed to co-operate with that in London, in any measures that may be taken to promote their purpose. At Bristol much opposition is made by the merchants and their dependants, who are many, perhaps most of them, engaged in it. Our petition was signed by eight hundred, or upwards; ... Many things have been written in the papers on both sides; some pieces I have written myself, under the signature Britannicus, which I purpose to get printed in a few pamphlets, and shall send one of them to you. The injustice and inhumanity of the trade are glaring, and upon this ground I mainly proceed: upon the policy of abolishing it I treat lightly, because I am dubious about it; ... I am afraid the abolition will not take place speedily, if at all. The trading and mercantile interest will make great outcry; the scheme will be thought chimerical, and after producing a few warm speeches, will, I fear, die away. (Gregory 6.23)

Hall's letters to *the Bristol Gazette* appeared in the editions of 7 and 14 February [Pg. 215] 1788. Apparently a third was envisaged, for the second ends with 'to be concluded in our next', but no third letter ever appeared. Whether Hall intended to write a third letter and then changed his mind (for whatever reasons), or whether the editor of the paper, William Pine, a long-respected publisher, bookseller and printer of the *Gazette*, simply misunderstood Hall's original design, is difficult to know. The fact that John Harris, Esq., a long-time Alderman, Sheriff of Bristol in 1788 (he would be elected Mayor in 1790), and senior deacon at Broadmead, was intimately connected to

the shipping and manufacturing interests may explain why Hall, if he did plan to write a third letter, or have them published as a pamphlet, chose not to continue his opposition publicly in print. It may have contributed as well to Hall's decision not to reveal his identity by signing the letters in his own name.

In April an 'influential committee' of local merchants was formed to defend the slave-trade, a business 'on which the welfare of the West India islands and the commerce and revenue of the kingdom so essentially depend' (Latimer 2.477). Whereas the committee against the slave-trade was led by Quakers and Dissenting ministers and their friends and followers, this committee comprised the majority of the aldermen of the Corporation of the City of Bristol, including John Harris. It too presented a petition to Parliament, arguing for regulation and gradual abolition, as well as some form of compensation for those currently invested in the trade (Latimer 2.477). Shortly thereafter, in what may have been a direct response, even in riposte, to Harris's committee, Caleb Evans, Harris's pastor at Broadmead, at a meeting of the Baptist Western Association at Portsmouth Common on 15 May 1788, led the group in sending a letter and a monetary contribution of five guineas to Granville Sharp and the London Committee, publicly resolving 'to recommend earnestly to the members of all our churches, to unite in promoting to the utmost of their power every scheme, that is or may be proposed, to procure the *abolition* of a traffic so unjust, inhuman, and disgraceful; and the continuance of which tends to counteract and destroy the operation of the benevolent principles and spirit of our common Christianity' (*Bristol Gazette*, 12 June 1788). Thomas Clarkson must have thought this petition significant, for he mentions it at the conclusion of the first volume of his *History* (568-9).

According to a report by Granville Sharp and the London Committee of 12 August 1788, which was published in the *Bristol Gazette* on 11 September 1788, over a hundred petitions were presented to the House of Commons during the first six months of 1788, and they did much to spur the debate in Parliament from May to July. A bill for the abolition of the slave-trade was submitted, steadily amended, and eventually deferred to the next session of Parliament. What Parliament did pass was a provision for better regulating overcrowding on ships transporting slaves from Africa to the West Indies. Even this measure was vehemently opposed by many merchants in London, Liverpool and Bristol, and angry letters continued to surface in the Bristol papers well into June 1789. By July, however, the debate over abolition was temporarily left on the table, as Parliament passed the first Act [**Pg. 216**] restricting the slave-trade in British history.

Whether Hall intended to say more at this time on the subject of the slave-trade is inconclusive, but his two extant letters from the *Bristol Gazette* form a complete argument in themselves. Hall's insight into this volatile issue was keen for his years. The fears he expressed concerning the political will of the majority in relation to the economic power of the few would be fulfilled in many ways. Just as he had predicted in his letter to his father, the abolition of the slave-trade did not take place 'speedily', for the 'mercantile interest' did indeed make a 'great outcry' and after many 'warm speeches' on both sides the issue was largely postponed during the 1790s in the aftermath of the French Revolution and the English war with France.

Fortunately the voices opposed to the slave-trade did not 'die away', as Hall feared they would after this one action by Parliament; they continued to assail the evils of the

trade, eventually winning its abolition in 1807. Years later Hall would return to the subject himself, this time on the issue of slavery in general. While a pastor in Leicester, Hall was asked by Thomas Babington, President of the Committee of the Leicester Auxiliary Anti-Slavery Society, to compose a pamphlet against slavery, which was published anonymously by the Society in 1824, entitled *An Address on the State of Slavery in the West India Islands*. Hall was a member of the Committee, and delivered a stinging critique of the practice as it continued among the British Colonies. In language reminiscent of his Bristol letters of 1788, he laments

the shocking spectacle of nearly a million of our fellow-subjects, with no other imputation than that of a darker skin, doomed to a condition which, were it assigned as the punishment of the greatest guilt, would be accused of immoderate severity. We behold these children of nature, for the purpose chiefly of supplying us with the ingredient which sweetens our repasts, compelled by men, who call themselves christians, to exhaust to its dregs a more bitter cup than is usually allotted to the greatest adepts in crime'.
(Gregory 3.314-5)

That victory, however, he would not live to see. The total abolition of slavery in England and its colonies was finally achieved in 1834, three years after Hall's death.

What follows are the two letters of Hall as they appeared originally in the *Bristol Gazette* for 7 and 14 February 1788. To my knowledge they have never been reprinted before or attached to any writings or memoirs of Hall. Olinthus Gregory simply says that he could not find them (6.23), and hence did not put them in his edition of *The Works of Robert Hall* (1834). Neither Morris nor Mursell even mention Hall's letters on slavery, nor does any other work on Hall. Though only twenty-three when he composed these letters, they reveal much about the emergent rhetorical precision of Hall's discourse and his affinity with political issues that would mark him as one of the most powerful voices of Dissent in England for the next forty years. Even in these brief letters we see his biting satiric wit, his keen insight into the heart of the issue, and his brilliant rhetorical skills honed so carefully [Pg. 207] in those endless debates with James Mackintosh at Aberdeen. The writer who would shine so brightly in two of the most pointed political pamphlets of the 1790s, *Christianity Consistent with a Love of Freedom* (1791) and *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press* (1793), is evident in these early attempts to mould public opinion about the inhumanity and inconsistency of the slave-trade. Any attempt at defending the practice of 'turning the human species into a commodity, and trafficking in blood' was to Hall 'an insult on the use of language and the art of reasoning', for 'the principles of humanity are immutably the same' for all people in all times and places, and the most basic of those principles is the right to liberty. By continuing the slave-trade (and here Hall is speaking to his fellow townspeople and even to some members of his own church), 'we are extending the empire of barbarity and ignorance, and scattering the sparks of dissention amongst unoffending multitudes!' while 'the genius of Britain, the guardian angel of Europe, stands by smeared with blood and smiles malignant over these scenes of horror' (*Bristol Gazette*, 7 February 1787).

SLAVE TRADE

To the Printer of the Bristol Gazette

Sir,

By inserting the following you will oblige your constant Reader, Britannicus.

I am particularly happy to find amongst the inhabitants of this city so laudable a zeal and unanimity in opposing the Slave Trade. Perhaps there has been no object presented to the public for years that more deserves their serious attention than that which now lies before them. It is a question that respects the happiness of millions, and under the sincerest conviction of its importance, I am induced by the channel of your paper, to convey my sentiments upon it to the public.

The trading in slaves is so far from being supported by any principles of equity and justice that it is almost an insult on the use of language and the art of reasoning to attempt its vindication. Every one has a right to the exercise of his liberty, either in a social or solitary state, where it does not interfere with the welfare of others. Whenever there is a direct tendency in the actions of any individual to injure the liberty of the community, it is right that the personal liberty of that individual should be sacrificed to the general happiness of the whole.

Upon this principle, Slavery is deservedly incurred by crimes, in as much as it is agreeable to the principles of justice, that he who has once abused his liberty to the injury of others, should be rendered incapable of repeating his offence by being deprived of it. It is unnecessary to observe how wide these cases are from the situation of the African Negroes. - For what injury can we have received from these unhappy nations, or any individuals amongst them, who lie in the remote parts of the earth, and perhaps had never been known if interest and cruelty had not [Pg.218] stretched forth their rapacious arms to draw them from their obscurity. It cannot be pretended that they are subject to our controul, or that they are amenable to our laws; and therefore it is great injustice to subject them to any punishment at all: but to make a trade of them from no other motive than gain, is turning the human species into a commodity, and trafficking in blood. Whatever principles will justify us in enslaving the Africans, will justify the Africans in enslaving us. Here then are two mutual rights, directly opposed to each other. But the opposition of rights is the annihilation of all right; and is absurd and impossible in morals, as the existence opposite truths in science. there needs only the admission of such principles to bring society into utmost confusion, and to open a way to all the barbarities ingenuity could discover, or cruelty inflict. It is to be lamented on this occasion that our feelings depend so much upon the nearness of their objects, that scenes of cruelty in particular lose their influence by being viewed in the aggregate; and that we often shed a tear over the distresses of an individual, while we contemplate with indifference the fate of millions. But surely it is the business of enlarged humanity to bring distant objects near; and to remedy the imperfections of feeling, by the efforts of reason. Suppose a distant country were to send a fleet to our coasts, to land their forces and to carry off every year 30,000 of our countrymen; it would never be a question with us concerning the justice and equity of such a proceeding. And is that justice in Africa which would be inhumanity in England? Do the eternal principles of right differ in different parts of the globe, and lose their force and obligation the moment a fleet is wafted over the ocean? No! the conduct of men may vary, and their feelings may fluctuate; but the principles of humanity are immutably the same.

The maxims upon which the Slave Trade is founded, are contradicted by the united voice of the most eminent writers on legislation and morals. The immortal Grotius

declares, that Slavery is contrary to a state of nature, and can only spring legitimately from compact or crime. See 3 capbook 7. De Iure Bellis et Pacis.

Baron Puffendorf confirms r the opinion of Grotius, when he observes, that Slavery at first took its rise from contract; and that though in after times it became customary to reduce to Slavery~ the prisoners taken in war, the conquerors had no right to transfer them as property. 'Sure', said he, 'the sacred rights of humanity bid us never to forget that our Slave is a man as well as we, and therefore ought not to be treated its our moveables, which we use and abuse and destroy at pleasure. And when we wish to part with our Slave, we ought not purposely and without his deserving of it, to put him into the hands of people that will be barbarous and inhuman to him. ' - If such were the sentiments of these great writers respecting Slaves lawfully acquired, what would they have thought of nations crossing the ocean in quest of men, and after forcing them by thousands from their native homes, subjecting them to Slavery in the most disgraceful form it can assume, without any colour of justice or pretence of hostility! If the abettors of these proceedings will be hardy enough to assert, that superior force confers right, I think they can have no [Pg.219] objection, and I am sure I should have none, to have the maxim first tried upon themselves, by hanging those that maintain it.

In whatever light this trade is viewed, it presents a new face of deformity. The greater part of the Negro Slaves are composed of such as are taken prisoners in the continual wars that arose betwixt the petty kings on the continent of Africa. Their chief motive for engaging in these destructive wars, is the hope of procuring Slaves arid of enriching themselves by selling them to the British. Abandoned to this ill-fated policy, the respective States of Africa are kept in perpetual hostility and alarm; anxious to guard themselves against the attacks of their enemies, and to snatch the first opportunity of spreading devastation and war. The improvement of arts, the cultivation of lands, and the production of manufactories in the mean while all lie neglected; nothing is thought of but rapine, nothing is heard but the cry of war, and the continent of Africa is kindled into a flame, which the British merchants never fail to supply by throwing in fresh incense to their idol. Were Africa ever so fertile in its soil, or copious in the materials of manufactory, what could it be expected to produce in the midst of these incessant broils; when the uniform experience of all ages tells us, that the spirit of commerce cannot subsist with perpetual and diffusive war. It is not easy to describe, or even to conceive the mischief and misery this inhuman traffic occasions. It is chargeable not only with the evil it produces, but with the good it prevents. In the prosecution of this inhuman trade, we are extending the empire of barbarity and ignorance, and scattering the sparks of dissention amongst unoffending multitudes! Who that is a Briton does not feel his indignation kindle at the injustice and inhumanity of this traffic? For heaven's sake let it not be said that Englishmen, who boast of religion arid liberty, cross the ocean to involve unknown nations and helpless barbarians in mutual hostility; and that whilst they mingle in slaughter, the genius of Britain, the guardian angel of Europe, stands by smeared with blood and smiles malignant over these scenes of horror. [To be concluded in our next.]

*On the SLAVE TRADE
[Continued from our last.]*

In palliation of the Slave Trade it has been urged by some, that the Negroes are of a

different species from the Europeans; that they have not the same common parent with us, but that they form a kind of connecting link betwixt white men and brutes. This supposition appears to me extremely improbable. It is an invariable rule in all human enquiries, to admit no more causes than are absolutely necessary to account for the appearances in question; because it is assumed as certain, that a wise being can do nothing in vain. To refer every lesser apparent dissimilarity to a different origin is abhorrent from the spirit of philosophy, and is rather the multiplying of whims than deducing causes. This maxim seems to extend to no subject more directly than to that which now lies before the public. Why should it be imagined that the great Author of Nature formed two different pairs of the human [Pg. 220] species, when there appears to be no end answered by the creation of both, but might have been accomplished by one; except we suppose he had the West Indies particularly in view, and was inclined to make a fatherly provision for the cruelty and avarice of Slave merchants. The various nations of the earth have always been distinguished by a cast of body and a trait of character peculiar to themselves, and some of them to a degree very little inferior to the Negroes; and therefore if we do not wish to introduce an infinite multiplicity of original parents, we must account for the appearance of Negroes from the further operation of those causes, which have so acknowledged an influence in varying the human species.

We often behold individuals under the same climate, and in the same neighbourhood where their blood is frequently mingled, who, except in the article of colour, vary from each other as much as the Negroes from the whites. And why then should we wonder that remote nations, which compose as it were the great families of the earth, should so much differ, when we consider that the causes which first gave rise to this distinction, have probably been operating for thousands of years without being ever counteracted by any communication of manners or intermixture of breed?

I have one observation to add upon this subject, which I cannot but think of consequence, which is, that the true point upon which this whole question respecting the species of the Negroes turns, is in my opinion generally mistaken. The question is not whether the Negroes in qualities of mind are now equal to us, but, whether they were not originally so!

And therefore if it could be made to appear, that a negro infant is not as capable of cultivation and refinement as a European, this would not go a step towards a demonstration of their being a different species. Every one knows that the genius becomes dull and feeble if it is not awakened by frequent exertion; and since the imperfections of the mind are transmitted by generation no less than those of the body, the character of a nation involved in ignorance for a length of ages may become to almost any degree sunk and degraded. In this case, the successive impressions received by each generation must be taken into the account, before we can properly estimate the effects of long continued barbarity.

*Besides, were the complexion and appearance of the Negroes sufficient to prove them of a different species from us, it would by no means follow they **are** of an inferior. Neither amongst individuals or nations do we find that nature hath established any harmony or proportion betwixt the perfection of the mind and the beauty of the external structure. How often do we behold a great glow of virtue and force of understanding assembled in a form the most ungraceful and displeasing; and why may not this hold true of large collections of men as well as individuals.*

After all, this fancied inferiority of the species in the Blacks is a poor pretence for enslaving and tormenting them and will always be them particularly unbecoming in the mouth of a Slave Merchant, whilst the heart of a Blood-hound is more disgraceful than the skin of a Negro. [Pg. 221]

Upon the footing of humanity, I have observed the Slave Trade is generally abandoned by its warmest advocates, while they are eager to enlarge upon the necessity and the policy of it. But surely from a trade that is acknowledged to be supported by oppression, and attended with cruelty, every honest and feeling mind must revolt. In an emergence [sic], where policy and justice take different sides, where we are solicited on the one hand by the calls of interest, and on the other by the voice of humanity, it cannot occasion a moment's hesitation to an upright man which path to pursue. All the apology I have ever yet heard for the Slave Trade amounts to this, that in certain cases it is right to sacrifice duty to interest, and that gain will sanctify cruelty and injustice. But consider my countrymen, by all that is sacred I conjure you to consider the enormity of this principle. In the first place, it annihilates every distinction of right and wrong; for this distinction rests entirely upon the eternal obligation of doing, and of doing that only, which reason and conscience recommend. But that is not all. This principle gives a sanction to all the crimes have degraded human nature, or filled the world with distress, for when were crimes committed but with the hope of advantage? By this principle successful artifice is stamped with the name of wisdom, mutual treachery and violence are sanctioned by it, the secret assassin may take shelter under it; this principle will wipe out the reproach of villainy and the stain of blood. The maintainers of this principle shew their good will to themselves and their brethren, by rearing a sanctuary to receive the cruel, the profligate and the abandoned of every age and of every nation.

It is evident that the unlimited extension of this principle could not fail of putting an end to the existence, and, in time, to the very name of virtue. It is necessary therefore that the advocates for it should tell us how far it ought to be carried. Let them mark its boundaries, and inform us to what point injustice and cruelty should be permitted to go in advancing upon the bounds of humanity and right. It must be allowed they have proceeded far already; they have reached Africa, and have carried from thence whole nations into captivity. They have already wasted the lives and spilled the blood of millions. They have forged fetters for multitudes unoffending and unknown. With a merciless hand they have already cut asunder the sacred ties of nature and of blood; have torn the helpless mother from the embraces of her infant; deaf to the shrieks of despair, they have divided hearts the most nearly united; have broken one to pieces in Africa, and sent the other to bleed in America. These things have they done my countrymen, and we kept silence; but the Slave Merchant thinks he has not yet proceeded far enough. His selfish cruelty looks forward to future times and dooms generations yet unborn to similar distress. He still views with a malignant joy the extent of Africa; hopes to accomplish new schemes of devastation and war; and, like the great enemy, has no other pleasure in seeing these unhappy men increase and multiply than the prospect of enslaving and destroying them.

Impressed with the fullest conviction of the inhumanity and injustice of the Slave [Pg.222] Trade, and far from considering the policy of it as forming any essential part of the question, we earnestly wish the advocates of it, would inform us upon what moral

principles they proceed; or if they agree to abandon them to tell us so plainly, that we may regard them with the detestation they deserve.

It is an alarming instance of the profligacy and abandoned spirit of the present age, that there are men to be found, pretending to any decency of character, who openly defend inhumanity and vice; who first enrich themselves with the spoils of oppression, and then, in the face of the day, in this land of freedom, are not ashamed, with blushless effrontery to vindicate their conduct.

If there be any principle in morals that one would suppose might pass uncontested, it is that every individual has by nature certain rights which he can never forfeit but by his own fault; that to enslave such a person, or to make him the instrument of gaining riches and power, is an invasion of these rights, and incurs the imputation of guilt. A maxim of this nature is the basis of all reasoning upon legislature, policy and morals. Let any Slave Merchant vindicate his traffick upon this principle, if he can.

When I consider that in the intercourse of private life, and in the behaviour of man to man, this maxim is the sacred bond of society, I am at a loss to conceive how any one can seriously think of establishing any other to regulate the conduct of nations, unless it be, that nation implying vast force and number, he is dazzled with their greatness, and imagines that the sanctions of virtue are too slight and feeble to be intended to restrain the violence of their operations. Perhaps he may look upon the various nations of the earth as a set of lawless monsters, who are permitted to roam thro' the universe at will, to devour all they meet, to take possession of the sea and of the dry land, to plunder, to waste, and to destroy. A moment's reflection however will be sufficient to dispel all those chimerical ideas. The nature of an action is not at all changed by the numbers that are concerned in it, nor is its guilt in the least lessened, or increased, by the force exerted to perform it. --- An undertaking in which it would be cruel and unjust for one to engage in, would be equally so if two or a million were employed in it. It deserves too to be remarked, that numbers are great or small only by comparison; and when we take into account the generations of men that (ire dead, that now exist, and that will hereafter appear upon the face of the earth, no single nation bears any greater proportion to this innumerable multitude than one to a whole nation,- and therefore possesses upon this footing as little authority for violating the general right of mankind, as any individual to injure his neighbour.

It is by no means my intention to enter into a particular consideration of the policy of abolishing the Slave Trade; I think it is best to submit this to the wisdom of legislature; but thus much I hope I shall be excused in observing, that this question turns chiefly upon the possibility of maintaining the West Indies without a fresh supply of Slaves from Africa. It is an unquestionable fact, that there has taken place in the West Indies a prodigious and unheard of waste of the human species, [Pg. 223] that of millions that have been carried there from Africa, no traces are now to be found; and that after an annual importation of so many thousands, there are not more Slaves on several of our islands than there were a century ago.

These are alarming facts, & are surely a loud call upon us to examine into the causes that have for a length of time blotted out of existence so many inhabitants of the globe. The climate of the West Indies it must be remembered is congenial with that of the Negroes; and therefore its excessive heat far from being detrimental, might be expected

rather to lengthen than cut short the period of their lives; yet the West Indies are the grave of Africa. In the anguish of their mind, in the cruelty of their treatment, in the unequal distribution of the sex, must we look for true sources of their destruction.

BRITANNICUS

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