

Why Don't Philosophers Talk About Slavery?

[Chris Meyns](#) 28 October 2017

Chris Meyns on a glaring omission

The emergence and rapid expansion in the 1600s of a transatlantic system of the enslavement of, and commercial trade in, people profoundly shaped the modern world, both materially and intellectually. Many of its effects still reverberate today. Yet when you turn to scholarship on the philosophy of the early modern period, you'll find a gaping absence. Rarely, if at all, is slavery studied in the history of modern philosophy.

I am, by some counts, a scholar of early modern philosophy, so I'm professionally sensitive to the goings-on in this period. The fact bothers me. This article began as a string of tweets on how the topic of slavery is largely absent from scholarship and teaching of early modern philosophy. Since then I've become even more convinced there's something wrong here.

During the past decade, from January 2007 up to and including December 2016, five top journals that publish articles in History of Early Modern Philosophy ([Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy](#), [Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie](#), [British Journal for the History of Philosophy](#), [Journal of the History of Philosophy](#), and [History of Philosophy Quarterly](#)) published 990 original articles combined. Of these 990 articles, only five (0.5%) have slavery as their main theme. None of these five engages squarely with the early modern period. Two address Nietzsche's tirade against slave mentality, two others cover ancient Aristotle, and a final one turns to the nineteenth-century libertarian John Stuart Mill.

The area [17th/18th Century Philosophy](#) in the [popular PhilPapers repository](#) does not even have a leaf category for "Slavery". For comparison, it does have dedicated subsections for Kant's ideas on what it takes to be a genius (34 entries) and "The Is/Ought Gap" in Hume's meta-ethics (27 entries).

Nor is the absence confined to research. A typical “Early Modern Philosophy 101” course will cover sceptical fantasies, social contracts and monadologies, but won’t say anything about enslavement. Even the [Diversity and Inclusiveness Syllabus Collection](#) of the American Philosophical Association falls short here. None of the syllabi listed under “History of Philosophy” addresses enslavement. Slavery comes up only twice in this collection, both for courses in social and political philosophy. Why is slavery missing from the history of early modern philosophy?

All this could be an accident. Scholars should just write on what they’re passionate about, right? No one is obliged to study any particular topic. But philosophers aren’t stupid. They’re trained to step back, reflect, and should notice when their passion-driven work morphs into a collective omission.

Perhaps there’s simply little to talk about. A lack of source materials. Did philosophers in early modern times even discuss enslavement?

They did. There are some big name philosophers we know and love. John Locke in his [Second Treatise of Government](#) (1690) insists that all “men” are naturally in “a state of perfect freedom ... [and] equality”, and that no one could sell themselves into slavery for money, even if they wanted to. Some are quick to celebrate anti-slavery pamphlets, such as Montesquieu’s claim in 1748 that “The state of slavery is in its own nature bad”.

There are also less familiar names. Meet Phyllis Wheatley (1753–1784), one of the first African-American published authors, whose poem [“On Being Brought from Africa to America”](#) reflects her own experience. Meet Quobna Ottobah Cugoano (1757–ca. 1791), born in present-day Ghana. He survived abduction and forced labour exploitation at the sugar plantations of Grenada. His [Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species](#) (1787) refutes point-by-point all attempts of “barbarous inhuman Europeans” to justify slavery. Cugoano argued for a global duty to liberate enslaved people: “Wherefore it is as much the duty of a man who is robbed in that manner to get out of the hands of his enslaver, as it is for any honest community of men to get out of the hands of rogues and villains.” Meet also Olaudah Equiano's (1746–1797), whose [The Interesting](#)

[Narrative and the Life of "Olaudah Equiano" or Gustavus Vassa, the African](#), published in 1789, presents a host of considerations about enslavement, dignity and empowerment. And meet Doctor of Philosophy, Anton Wilhelm Amo (1703–1759), originally from Axim (in today's Ghana) and later associated with the German universities of Jena and Halle. Amo published against slavery, in addition to writing on philosophy of mind and philosophical method. Having experienced enslavement first-hand, these philosophers write from a position of epistemic authority.

There is also a ripple of white European women philosophers, who challenge their own subjugated position in society as one of enslavement. "If all men are born free, how is it that all women are born slaves?", inquires Mary Astell in [Some Reflections Upon Marriage](#) (1706). Judith Drake, in [An Essay in Defence of the Female Sex](#) (1696), complains that: "Women, like our Negroes in our Western Plantations, are born Slaves, and live Prisoners all their Lives." These white women appropriated images from African-Caribbean plantation enslavement to lament their own social condition.

You shouldn't be embarrassed if you hadn't heard of these philosophers. Many professionally employed in departments of philosophy would not be able to mention a single one of their works either. The "ossifying effects of canonisation", as editor of the *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* Michael Beaney has called it, can be extremely cunning, quietly but surely making us forget scores of significant figures and questions.

With so much material on early modern philosophies of slavery, how is it that this aspect of the period gets left out? The answer is: because it fits uncomfortably with how we like to think of the story of modern science. Early modern writers liberally used the cloak of science and philosophy to provide seeming 'justifications' for the enslavement of people. Such episodes smudge the pristine image of our beloved heritage. Yet sometimes, history of philosophy turns ugly real quick.

Systems of slavery have existed in many forms and cultures, from ancient Greek penestae, to the nobi class in early Korean dynasties, Ottoman slave trade, and debt slavery in present-day Europe. An estimated 45.8 million

people currently live in some form of enslavement, according to globalslaveryindex.org. Still, the early modern period brought a fundamental, lasting change in conceptions of enslavement.

Societies have always distinguished in- and out-groups. However, many early Greek, Hebrew and Christian societies enabled people of social out-groups to escape their inferior status by converting (religiously), or by assimilating to the practices of the dominant social group. In ancient Greece, for instance, so-called “barbarians” (people whose talk sounded to Greek ears like “bar bar bar”) could assimilate by learning to speak, write and live like a Greek.

In Europe this began to change during the fifteenth century, as Robert W. Sussman charts in [The Myth of Race](#). The Spanish Inquisition introduced a new, biological form of in- and out-group discrimination. Grounds for discrimination began to include not just beliefs, practices or religion, but also considerations about ethnicity, including “purity of blood”. The idea arose that there are biologically different kinds of people. While the discrimination was economically and politically motivated, the surrounding whiff of scientific theory gave it the appearance of justification.

Switching one ground of discrimination for another may seem minor, but was seismic. You can alter your habits, beliefs, and which language you speak. But biological grounds, based on blood, remove this option. In Sussman’s words: “Minority or conquered peoples could not change their identities; they could not convert or assimilate into mainstream society.”

In subsequent centuries, with heightened enthusiasm from European intellectuals, we find these basic ideas expanding into two pernicious fabrications. Fabrication number one is that there are distinct species of humans. Sometimes this idea takes the form that, while all humans share a single origin in God’s creation of Eve and Adam (a view known as monogenesis), due to influences of climate and habit, certain groups of people transformed from the ideal into “degenerate” kinds of human. Sometimes the idea was that not all people actually stem from the same source, but some have a different origin (polygenesis).

Building on this, fabrication number two is that there is a hierarchy determining which of these species was truly, optimally human – which included dimensions such as the capacity for reasoning, civilisation, and moral sense. Sadly unsurprisingly, the white Europeans devising this hierarchy decided that white Europeans come out on top. Other “kinds” of people were said to hold the lower ranks of this of cobbled-together ranking. Kant for instance subdivides humans into “White”, “Black”, “the Hun race (Mongol or Kalmuk)” and “Hindu or Hindustani”, casually noting in his lectures on physical geography that “Humanity is at its greatest perfection in the race of the whites.”

Ideas about hierarchically ordered human kinds were used as post-hoc rationalisations for how Europeans mistreated the local people they encountered on their voyages of conquest. As Sussman puts it:

“Although these discriminating practices began as a result of economic and political conditions, ‘scientific’ theories justifying this kind of racism began to appear in Spain and Portugal in the fifteenth century, and after the discovery of America, they were expanded to justify similar racist ideas toward Native Americans, Asians, and, later, enslaved Africans.”

If Native Americans and Africans were not fully human anyway, it might be okay to mistreat them, exploit their bodies, resources, break up family ties, wipe out personal histories. Europeans invented a concept of race to justify enslavement, and called it science.

Philosopher Charles Mills has conceptualised these early modern events as the forging of a “racial contract”, in his [1997 book by that same title](#). A variation on the well-known “social contract”, in this racial contract a group of humans, self-designated as “white”, based on certain phenotypical criteria, agrees to categorise all remaining humans as “nonwhite”. They agree to treat whites as full-blown persons, while people of colour are relegated to a status of being less-than-full-persons, or “subpersons”, with an “inferior moral status”. The racial contract, on this view, is an implicit agreement between whites to differentially privilege whites and to exploit the bodies, land, resources and to deny socioeconomic opportunities to those categorised as

“nonwhite”. The latter are mere living “objects” the contract governs.

Our much-loved philosophers did not invent these quirks of thought. But, plot twist: their early-adaptor enthusiasm certainly helped cement race-based rationalisations of slavery as intellectually respectable principles.

Locke happily claimed that all people are naturally born free, while also co-authoring [the Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina](#) (1669), of which article 110 reads: “Every freeman of Carolina shall have absolute power and authority over his negro slaves, of what opinion or religion soever”, because any other option would infringe on an enslaver’s property rights.

David Hume, still widely cherished for his scepticism about self and causation, was among the first to accept polygenesis, and also held that people of colour were “naturally inferior” to whites. Here’s Hume in his essay [“Of National Character”](#) (1748):

“There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. (...) Not to mention our colonies, there are Negro slaves dispersed all over Europe, of whom none ever discovered the symptoms of ingenuity; though low people, without education, will start up amongst us, and distinguish themselves in every profession.”

Few things will be able to shatter Kant’s standing as one of the most influential moral theorists of the modern age. But Kant, piggybacking on Hume, launched racist anthropology. Kant accepted polygenesis. Kant proclaimed that in the hierarchical order of human species, only whites could attain freewill, and full moral and rational abilities – be genuine persons. Kant’s moral egalitarianism had a quantifier domain restriction, as it only applied to whites. His prominence allowed these ideas to become entrenched in the classification of humanity until deep into the twentieth century. (Kant’s overt racism is an outlier, as it has by now attracted some scholarly attention.)

Some of our beloved “core” early modern figures absorbed white supremacist

ideas into their philosophies, lending them philosophical credibility, and so contributing to propagating them onward for centuries. A continued silence about enslavement in the early modern period hurts philosophy. It does so, of course, because it is historically inaccurate. Philosophers wrote about enslavement at the time, but many of their works are by and large glossed over, omitted. As a result, our understanding of the philosophy of this era is at best limited, selective, sanitised. That hurts.

It also hurts epistemically. We miss out on arguments, insights, alternative conceptualisations. This concerns not just the definitional question – what enslavement is, how it affects people, how people could make it seem justified – but also a host of associated issues about freedom, humanity, debt, property, body and mind, power. Is it a mere coincidence that Spinoza argues that humans are held in a state of “bondage” (“servitude” in Latin) of their emotions? Does it just so happen that Hume, in chronicling the relation between passion and the will, writes: “Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions”? Both authors signal a condition in which one thing (humans, reason) lacks self-governance, and subjugation helps them conceptualise it. We’re apt to miss this when we don’t acknowledge how slavery crept up in philosophical thought around that time.

Personhood often figures prominently on Early Modern syllabi. Descartes in his [Discourse on Method](#) and [Meditations](#) showed that in a condition of global doubt, an individual “I” can still have certainty that they themselves exist: whenever I think, I am – his cogito, sum. While the cogito functions as a universal formula, performable by all, Mills charges that it only reflects an extremely limited angle on the range of philosophical issues around uncertainty of personal existence.

Someone whose humanity systematically gets ignored based on their phenotype may face radically different problems. Mills writes:

“If your daily existence is largely defined by oppressions, by forced intercourse with the world, it is not going to occur to you that doubt about your oppressor's existence could in any way be a serious or pressing philosophical problem; this idea will simply seem frivolous, a perk of social privilege.”

For someone who gets treated not as a person but like some animate object – Aristotle called enslaved people “living tools” – the core philosophical issue is rather to convince others that she is a person, someone with rationality, moral standing. The bulk of Cugoano’s *Thoughts and Sentiments* is dedicated to this very purpose.

I cannot help hearing Mills as challenging philosophers, like me, who study the early modern period. These are our heroes, this is our period, it’s our omission if we fail to theorise it. But has the challenge been taken up? Barely. Of the 2,629 citations to Mills’ text (as of August 2017), hardly any are to scholarship on Descartes or early modern philosophy more generally.

Few of philosophy’s seventeenth and eighteenth century heroes spoke out against slavery. Today, few historians of early modern philosophy speak about slavery at all. We can call it an “occupational neglect”. I’m not sure whether enslavement is the right organising principle to confront the relevant philosophical realities. Like genocide, poverty, or sexism, slavery is not to be taken on light-heartedly. It’s not just another research niche. The reality of slavery is ugly. Many still feel a personal stigma around slavery descent; meaningful reparations have not yet materialised. Philosophers should avoid propping up “slavery fan fiction”, as Roxane Gay said of HBO’s planned Confederate alt-history of the American civil war.

But given that enslavement is a fact of the actual world, its pernicious racialised version originating in modern times, any philosopher interested in the facts will somehow have to grapple with it. If we stay silent about philosophical arguments around slavery, it’s as though nothing happened. As if its consequences arose out of nowhere. As student-led campaigns such as “Why is My Curriculum White?” at UCL, “Decolonising the University” at SOAS and “Rhodes Must Fall” at the universities of Cape Town and Oxford have pointed out, many university curricula retain a whitewashed, colonialist slant. If we continue to revere some of its white supremacist figureheads – Kant and Hume were respectively the most and third-most discussed authors in the BJHP between 1993–2013 – while letting “slip” many of the authors interrogating slavery (including women and men of colour, white women),

that sends a message. That message is not pretty.

In Raoul Peck's recent documentary [I Am Not Your Negro](#), James Baldwin voices: "History is not the past. It is the present." How we write the history of philosophy is the present. We select certain topics, omit others, it has its effects. It's about time for philosophers studying the early modern period to start talking about slavery.

