

Andrews University

Digital Commons @ Andrews University

Honors Theses

Undergraduate Research

4-30-2020

Natural Law, Literary Accommodation and the Successful Social Justice Movement : Thomas Reid's Natural Law Philosophy and the Abolitionist Writings of Olaudah Equiano and Ottobah Cugoano

Patrick Miller

Andrews University, millerp@andrews.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/honors>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Miller, Patrick, "Natural Law, Literary Accommodation and the Successful Social Justice Movement : Thomas Reid's Natural Law Philosophy and the Abolitionist Writings of Olaudah Equiano and Ottobah Cugoano" (2020). *Honors Theses*. 238.

<https://dx.doi.org/10.32597/honors/238/>

<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/honors/238>

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Research at Digital Commons @ Andrews University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Andrews University. For more information, please contact repository@andrews.edu.

J. N. Andrews Honors Program

Andrews University

HONS 497

Honors Thesis

**Natural Law, Literary Accommodation and the Successful
Social Justice Movement:**

**Thomas Reid's Natural Law Philosophy and the Abolitionist Writings of
Olaudah Equiano and Ottobah Cugoana**

Patrick Miller

4/30/20

Advisor: Stephanie Carpenter, PhD

**Primary Advisor Signature: _____ Stephanie Carpenter,
PhD _____**

**Department of History and Political Science, Andrews
University**

I will be discussing natural law and the abolition movement of the 18th century- specifically the works of Olaudah Equiano and Ottobah Cugoano, two freed slaves who were members of an English abolitionist society known as the Sons of Africa- and the role that Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid's ideas of natural law played in their authorship. Natural law philosophy, based on the idea that observation of the natural world can lead to conclusions about morality, has largely been sidelined in modern conversations about ethics. However, it played an important part in one of the greatest moral struggles of western society- the abolition of slavery- both by producing a coherent set of arguments against the practice and, as I will argue, promoting a method of communication by which those arguments were to be successfully delivered. In this project I will seek to demonstrate how natural law philosophy lead early abolitionists to prioritize a literary style that seeks common ground on a basis of universal human identity.

The practice of literary accommodation, or the use of language, metaphors, and methods of argumentation with which an intended audience will identify, was adopted by Olaudah Equiano and to a lesser extent his friend and colleague Ottobah Cugoano. I will establish a connection between Equiano and Cugoano's thought and Scottish Enlightenment philosopher Thomas Reid, founder of the Scottish School of Common Sense and natural law scholar. He elucidated the importance of mutually recognized

language and logical structure for a functioning framework of natural rights, an idea that I argue facilitates the use of a language of accommodation.

Let's start with an explanation and history of Natural Law philosophy. Most sources agree that the concept known as natural law has its origins in 1485 with Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*. He was the first theologian/philosopher to articulate a natural law ethic, and all other natural law philosophies flow from his body of work. According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "If any moral theory is a theory of natural law, it is Aquinas's...Every introductory ethics anthology that includes material on natural law theory includes material by or about Aquinas; every encyclopedia article on natural law thought refers to Aquinas."¹

The first axiom of natural law for Aquinas was that God has placed within the natural world discernable qualities that present guiding principles, and an alternative source of revelation. These principles constitute a body of "natural law", which for Aquinas is a part of God's larger Eternal Law. Human beings, though flawed, are a part of the natural world, and we can ascertain natural law principles through observing their patterns of behavior and impulses. Aquinas believed that within every individual's nature there is a knowledge of "the good", and even though evil dispositions or strong emotion can negate its efficacy, it is still possible to discern through a sufficiently

¹ Murphy, Mark, "The Natural Law Tradition in Ethics", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/natural-law-ethics/>

aggregated study of subjects. The nature of “the good” is defined as that which is in accordance with reason, and it brings about human perfection and well-being through its inherent qualities.

I mentioned that Natural Law philosophy has somewhat “fallen by the wayside” in modern discussions of ethics, even though for centuries the idea of natural law was taken quite seriously by philosophers and lawmakers. The founding documents of the United States quote the most famous enlightenment natural law philosopher, John Locke, claiming his natural rights of “life, liberty and property.” Yet, nevertheless natural law has been washed away by the tide of modern materialistic philosophy; notions of legal positivism and the evolution of the human species are regarded as negating any use for conceptions of a universal human nature or overarching law. Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), regarded as the founder of utilitarianism, famously referred to natural law as “nonsense on stilts,” and went about establishing that all laws are merely constructs of social convention- a belief which would come to be known as legal positivism.²

This belief is the guiding principle in much of what constitutes modern legal philosophy, and it stems from another famous statement made by a different Scottish enlightenment thinker (not from the School of Common Sense) named David Hume. Jeremy Bentham once said that after reading Hume the “scales fell from his eyes”, an

² Crimmins, James E., "Jeremy Bentham", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/bentham/>

allusion to the story of the apostle Paul regaining his sight. Hume wrote an essay in 1739 titled *Treatise on Human Nature*, and in it he made this pronouncement:

In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remarked, that [as] the author...makes observations concerning human affairs, I am surprised to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions: is, and is not, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an ought, or an ought not. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence...a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it.³

What Hume is essentially saying here is that he sees no way of providing a rational basis for the way things *should be* in light of the way that things *are*. Another name for this concept is the so called “fact-value distinction” in philosophy, which has been a contributing factor in the rise of moral relativism. The consequence of saying that “oughts,” or moral valuations, are not obtainable from observing the state of the world (in direct opposition to natural law’s premise) is that we must either look to a metaphysical source for moral guidance or accept that all moral valuations are equally valid.

The latter is a conclusion reached by many proponents of philosophical naturalism, such as William Graham Sumner (1840-1910). As a proponent of moral relativism, he argued that all cultures have their own set of moral valuations -each of

³ Hume, David. Section 1, *Treatise of Human Nature*. p. 469-47
<https://books.google.com/books?id=Sp8B0ZdyAYC&pg=PA335#v=snippet&q=%22every%20system%20of%20morality%22&f=false>

which is uniquely suited for that culture from which it originated. “If we study human nature and human history, we find that civil institutions are only “better” and “best” relatively to the people for whom they exist, and that they can be so called only as they are more closely adjusted to the circumstances of the nation in question.”⁴ His view of cultures is that it is impossible to gauge the value of their moral systems from any point of reference other than their own; in other words, or rather in Thomas Aquinas’ terms, the definition of “the good” is different for every society and so there can be no universal standard.

On the opposite side of the philosophical spectrum is Thomas Reid’s natural law of Common Sense, which sought to unearth a universal standard of morality among cultures. A crucial component of Reid’s framework of Natural Law was the establishment of “common sense first principles,” an idea which he derived from Aristotle. For Aristotle, first principles are material facts about nature which have no discernable antecedent cause. In other words, things which appear to be unchangeable and inherent to the structure of nature, and which defy causal explanation. Today we would think of things like the speed of light or the gravitational constant. Though Aristotle was often greatly mistaken as to what these first principles might be, his basic assertion of their existence has yet to be refuted in both the realms of science and

⁴ William Graham Sumner, *The Challenge of Facts and Other Essays*, ed. Albert Galloway Keller. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1914. p. 244-245 <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/sumner-the-challenge-of-facts-and-other-essays>

philosophy. Reid's notion of "common sense first principles" applied this concept specifically to the study of human nature. His criteria for what constituted a common sense first principle was that it be observable universally across cultures; i.e. held in "common" by people in every nation: "We ought likewise to take for granted, as first principles, things wherein we find an universal agreement, among the learned and unlearned, in the different nations and ages of the world."⁵ An example of this would be how all humans share the capacity and desire for self-determination; People everywhere appear to like making their own decisions, and tend to resent their agency being taken away. Reid took this fact as evidence for a common sense first principle of self-determination.

So, now that we have covered the requisite background of natural law we can move on to an explanation of literary accommodation, and the concept of accommodation more generally, especially as it pertains to civil rights history and the black community. The definition of the term "accommodationist," as found in the Oxford English Dictionary, states: "a person considered willing to compromise with opponents in order to preserve social or political stability," and also "Of or relating to accommodationists or their methods; tending to seek or promote compromise." When the concept of accommodation is applied to the realm of literature, namely literary

⁵ Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of the Human Mind to Which are Added an Essay on Quantity and an Analysis of Aristoteles Logic*, (Thomas Tegg, London, 1827). pg. 19
https://books.google.com/books?id=dsZLv4B2wF8C&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&ad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false

accommodation, it denotes a “willingness to incorporate themes with which an intended audience can identify.” These concepts can be connected if you consider that literary accommodation is about “compromising” between your perspective, which you are familiar with, and your audience’s, which may be unfamiliar territory. Interestingly, the Oxford definition mentions that the term accommodationist has often been used in a pejorative manner, especially when in reference to black authors.⁶ Against this negative characterization we will see that Equiano and Cugoana are accommodationists in a laudable sense, and that their search for grounds of compromise with their audience is worth emulating.

Let’s explore the history of this term as it relates to the black community. In African American history the term accommodation has taken on a negative connotation in association with the debate between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois. They disagreed over whether it was important for African Americans to aggressively campaign for their rights under Du Bois’ Niagara Movement (later the NAACP) or to focus instead on carving out an economic and intellectual space for themselves as Washington attempted to do with his Tuskegee Institute. Washington did not think that challenging the racist legal system outright would bring about positive fruits, and wanted to build up the black community first before attempting to effect legislative

⁶ "accommodationist, n. and adj." OED Online, Oxford University Press, December 2019.
www.oed.com/view/Entry/247527.

change.⁷ Washington's position was negatively referred to as "accommodationist" for supposedly pandering to the racist attitudes of white lawmakers. As a result of the development and exacerbation of this debate, accommodation has often been portrayed in a negative light when it comes to black history, sometimes being used as a synonym for the "Uncle Tom" slur.

However, even though the term has at times taken on this larger connotation, there is an argument to be made for its being used in a laudable sense in the context of civil rights history. Of course, with our modern perspective on the ultimate success of the Civil Rights movement over the Jim Crow laws of the South, we cannot help but conclude that Du Bois was right in asserting that proactive activism was necessary to bring about change. However, this is not a conclusive statement on accommodation, because it is still possible to use accommodationist methods to accomplish activism. It is worth noting that Martin Luther King Jr. placed great emphasis on diplomatic and peaceful protest methods as opposed to his more astringent contemporaries, like Malcolm X. Furthermore, it is clear from his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* that King was arguing for civil rights on the basis of a Natural Law rationale; He referenced Thomas

⁷ Christopher E. Forth, "Booker T. Washington and the 1905 Niagara Movement Conference." *The Journal of Negro History* 72, no. 3/4 (1987): 45-56.
https://www.jstor.org/stable/3031507?refreqid=excelsior%3Aecb36926356f92eba4991f4ee65d73ef&seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents

Aquinas, saying, “An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law.”⁸

Indeed, existing historical scholarship establishes that the practice of accommodation played a major role in the efficacy of Equiano’s *An Interesting Narrative* with the British public. Of Equiano’s work, Tanya Caldwell, PhD, of Georgia State University writes, “The structure, rhetoric, and details of the Narrative itself reveal the extent of his fluency in the languages of law, politics, economics, and literature of eighteenth-century Britain...that the Narrative enjoyed phenomenal success in Great Britain, where it went through five editions in five years, but was poorly received in colonial America should not only remind twentieth-century readers that their perspective on the Narrative is not an eighteenth-century one, but should also serve as a marker of the accuracy with which Equiano gauged the concerns and interests of his contemporaries.”⁹ The phenomenal success of Equiano’s biography has been recognized as one of the key events that laid the groundwork for the abolition of slavery in England.

Thomas Reid’s relevance to the topic of literary accommodation is in part due to the fact that he was the first natural law philosopher who made a connection between the universal framework of natural law and a similarly “common” linguistic framework:

⁸ Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”, 16 April, 1963, (African Studies Center, University of Pennsylvania) https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html

⁹ Tanya Caldwell, "Talking Too Much English": Languages of Economy and Politics in Equiano's "The Interesting Narrative", *Early American Literature*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (1999), pp. 263-282. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25057168>

“There are other opinions that appear to be universal, from what is common in the structure of all languages...[for example] the distinction between substances, and the qualities belonging to them; between thought and the being that thinks; between thought and the objects of thought; is to be found in the structure of all languages.”¹⁰ Because our language is structured around how we think (our logical framework), he concludes that these universal linguistic similarities are evidence for a universally valid logical framework.

He then asserts that accepting we are all part of this common logical/linguistic framework is to also accept the existence of a subjective free will in the individual, for the distinction between thought and the being that thinks is one of its first principles. For Reid, the will has an existence autonomous from the process of reason, for it transcends the actions that it completes: “We do not give the name of mind to thought, reason or desire; but to that being which thinks, which reasons, and which desires. That every act or operation, therefore, supposes an agent, that every quality supposes a subject, are things which I do not attempt to prove, but take for granted.”¹¹ He goes on to extrapolate that any individual who demonstrates this free will or “common sense” must also possess a basic human right to liberty, another universally recognized principle: “This natural conviction of our acting freely, which is acknowledged by many who hold the doctrine of necessity, ought to throw the whole burden of proof upon that

¹⁰ Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, Pg. 264

¹¹ Ibid. pg. 155

side: for, by this, the side of liberty has what lawyers call a jus quaesitum, or a right of ancient possession, which ought to stand good till it is overturned.”¹² This philosophy was very much in vogue at the time with the same Abolitionist circles who were circulating the incredibly popular Wedgewood medallion, with its depiction of the man in chains and the caption “Am I not a man and a brother?” A young, bright and intellectual author arguing from these same lines of reasoning he had just discovered seems highly probable, leading me to believe an investigation into whether Reid influenced Equiano and Cugoano’s writing is worth undertaking.

The Harvard resource on writing historical essays states “Secondary sources are materials produced after the time period under study; they consider the historical subject with a degree of hindsight and generally select, analyze, and incorporate evidence to make an argument.” It is from secondary sources which I gain my contextual analysis and argue that Equiano and Cugoano were likely to have encountered Thomas Reid’s philosophy. The Scottish School had one of the earliest formulations of natural law that explicitly condemned slavery, and was discussed widely by other English abolitionist movements at the time.¹³ Thomas Reid published *An Inquiry Into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* in 1764, over two decades before Equiano’s

¹² Ibid. Pg. xxxiii

¹³ John Coffey, “The abolition of the slave trade: Christian conscience and political action”, *The Cambridge Papers*, (Jubilee Centre, June 2006). <http://www.jubilee-centre.org/the-abolition-of-the-slave-trade-christian-conscience-and-political-action-by-john-coffey/>

An Interesting Narrative in 1789 and Cugoano's Thoughts and Sentiments in 1791; thus it follows logically based on the timeline of events that the philosophy of natural law which Equiano and Cugoano encountered was most likely from the Scottish School of Common Sense.^{14 15}

According to the Harvard Writing Guide there are two types of comparative analysis, "Classic" comparison, in which you "weigh both A and B equally," and "keyhole" or "lens" comparison, where "A is used as a lens through which to view B."¹⁶ First I utilize the "keyhole" method of comparison to analyze Cugoano and Equiano's work through the lens of Thomas Reid's natural law philosophy. Specifically, I look for places where he may have influenced their conception of natural law and chosen methods of argumentation. There is a further layer of complexity to my comparative analysis, which is due to the fact that Cugoano put more effort into developing a comprehensive philosophy of natural law. This compensates for a dearth of philosophical reasoning on the part of Equiano, who uses natural law language, but does not explore the concept in great detail. I therefore focus on Cugoano with my "keyhole" analysis of Reid's influence, but use "Classic" comparative analysis to connect the

¹⁴ Nichols, Ryan and Yaffe, Gideon, "Thomas Reid", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/reid/>

¹⁵ George E. Boulukos, "Olaudah Equiano and the Eighteenth-Century Debate on Africa", Eighteenth-Century Studies, Vol. 40, No. 2 (Winter, 2007), pp. 241-255. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/30053452.pdf>

¹⁶ Kerry Walk, "How to Write a Comparative Analysis." Copyright 1998, for the Writing Center at Harvard University. <https://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/how-write-comparative-analysis>

writings of Equiano and Cugoano. However, accommodationist language, which I view as a logical application of Thomas Reid's philosophy to literary methods, is more prevalent in Equiano's work. Thus, an Interesting Narrative and Thoughts and Sentiments go hand in hand, supplementing each other in the way that they support my thesis of Thomas Reid's influence within the Sons of Africa.

As we gaze through the keyhole, it is first worth noting that Ottobah Cugoano appeals to natural law, highlighted in bold, as one of his evidences for slavery's fundamental wrongness. "For it is evident that no custom established among men was ever more impious; since it is contrary to reason, justice, nature, the principles of law and government, and the whole doctrine, in short, of **natural religion**, and the revealed voice of God." ¹⁷ Next, we can see that it is to one of Reid's common sense first principles, namely free, self-determined action, that Cugoano appeals in his argument that Africans are not "fitted for" and do not enjoy servitude, as many pro-slavery advocates would argue:

In this respect, though the common people are free, they often suffer by the villainy of their different chieftains, and by the wars and feuds which happen among them. Nevertheless their freedom and rights are as dear to them [the Africans], as those privileges are to other people. And it may be said that

¹⁷ Ottobah Cugoano, Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and wicked traffic of the slavery: and commerce of the human species, humbly submitted to the inhabitants of Great-Britain, (1791). pg. 104
<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eccodemo/K046227.0001.001/1:5?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>

freedom, and the liberty of enjoying their own privileges, burns with as much zeal and fervour in the breast of an Aethiopian, as in the breast of any inhabitant on the globe. ¹⁸

It seems quite clear from this passage that Cugoano is making an appeal on behalf of his African people to the Reidian principle of the human right to liberty. The clear emphasis on universality of experience, and inclination towards a natural state of freedom and not captivity both support the connection to Reid.

Although his work is primarily a chastisement of a society that has lost sight of the natural law, Cugoano nevertheless uses some accommodationist language in the framing of his criticisms:

But surely law and liberty, justice and equity, which are the proper foundations of the British government, and humanity the most amiable characteristic of the [British] people, must be entirely fled from their land, if they can think a less punishment due to themselves, for supporting and carrying on such enormous wickedness, if they do not speedily relinquish and give it up.” ¹⁹

Due to his apparently high estimation of these foundational values of British government, his belief in British humanity and even his book title, containing the phrase *humbly submitted to the inhabitants of Great Britain*, Cugoano comes off as more of a

¹⁸ Ibid. pg. 29.

¹⁹ Ibid. Pg. 99

zealous reformer than a condemnatory adversary, despite his at times scathing tone. Though contemporary engagement with his work appears to have been much more limited than with Equiano's and we do not have any book reviews of him from the time period, this was likely due to the more esoteric nature of his writing, in comparison with Equiano's adventuresome tales and captivating storytelling ability. Nevertheless, his work serves as a strong link between the Sons of Africa and Thomas Reid's philosophy of Common Sense.

Much like his friend Cugoano, Equiano had an introduction to the idea of natural law, either through the *Sons of Africa* or from other abolitionist groups such as the *Society for Affecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade*. There are other sources than his biography which establish Natural Law philosophy's importance for him, such as his commentary on the Pauline epistle to Philemon. As Mukti Barton points out in his paper titled "Was Paul an Arch-Advocate of Slavery or a Liberator?" (taken from the anthology *Black Theology, Slavery and Contemporary Christianity: 200 Years and No Apology*) Equiano argued against a pro-slavery interpretation of the story on the basis of his personal experiences with slavery and other guiding scriptural principles of fairness and decency. This approach to Scriptural exegesis which grounds itself in reason and the natural law can be traced to John Locke, whose work *On the Reasonableness of Christianity* emphasized this style of scriptural interpretation. Equiano's use of Locke's methods

shows a capacity for applying natural law principles within his arguments, making his incorporation of Common Sense philosophy more probable.

Although his magnum opus, *The Interesting Narrative*, was not focused primarily on natural law arguments, Equiano nevertheless makes an appeal to Common Sense first principles natural rights at the end. "Surely this traffic cannot be good...which violates that first natural right of mankind, equality and independency."²⁰ It is speculated that Equiano likely assisted Cugoana in the publishing of his work, and he certainly seems to have echoed some of his ideas about natural rights, if only in passing.

Finally, and most importantly for him, he frequently used literary accommodation, pointing out the similarities between his native African tribe's customs and Jewish ceremonial tradition, an appeal to the Judeo-Christian identity of his readership.

We [the Eboe people of Equiano's birth] practiced circumcision like the Jews, and made offerings and feasts on that occasion in the same manner as they did... I have before remarked that the natives of this part of Africa are extremely cleanly. This necessary habit of decency was with us a part of religion, and therefore we had many purifications and washings; indeed almost as many, and used on the same occasions, if my recollection does not fail me, as the Jews. Those that touched the dead at any time were obliged to wash and purify themselves before they could enter a dwelling-house. Every woman too, at certain times, was forbidden to come into a dwelling-house, or touch any person, or anything we ate.²¹

²⁰ Equiano, Olaudah, 1745-1797. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or, Gustavus Vassa, the African*, (Broadview Press, 2001).

<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eccodemo/K046227.0001.001/1:5?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>

²¹ Ibid, Ch. 1.

This method of establishing a shared identity with your audience is an established type of literary accommodation, and demonstrates the understanding Equiano had of religion's role in British society.

Furthermore, in his narrative he went out of his way to show how the Christian faith had changed his own life: After he was kidnapped the second time and forced into slavery, he had an experience with the cruel captain of his ship that tried his patience. There was a ship on the horizon, and the captain was terrified that it might belong to the Spanish. Because of this he was holding a torch near a powder keg and threatening to blow the whole ship up. Even though at this point he was holding an axe while confronting the slave captain, he writes that at the same time he was able to keep his composure, due to reciting bible verses such as Acts 17:26: "He hath determined the times before and set bounds on our habitations." Whether this is 100% percent factual or not, his religious experience clearly had an integral role to play in his narrative.

He also appealed to their economic sensibility and mercantilist motivations by advocating an increase in trade with a freed and more profitable African continent

A commercial intercourse with Africa opens an inexhaustible source of wealth to the manufacturing interests of Great Britain, and to all which the slave trade is an objection. If I am not misinformed, the manufacturing interest is equal, if not superior, to the landed interest, as to the value, for reasons which will soon appear. The abolition of slavery, so diabolical, will give a most rapid extension of manufactures, which is totally and diametrically opposite to what some interested people assert. The manufacturers of this country must and will, in the

nature and reason of things, have a full and constant employ by supplying the African markets."²²

Thus we can see that it was in striving to appeal to recognized and accepted rhetorical ideas, in accordance with one of Thomas Reid's first principles of Natural Law, that Equiano was able to gain the ear of an empire and convince its members of his and his countrymen's right to treatment as beings capable of rational thought.

There is substantial evidence of Thomas Reid's common sense principles of natural law within the work of Ottobah Cugoano. He makes repeated appeals to Reidean first principles within his treatise, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery*. I cannot say definitively that Reid was his primary influence in understanding natural law, but it appears highly likely that his ideas played a formulative role in Cugoano's critique of slavery.

Equiano is a little bit harder to connect to Reid due to the aforementioned dearth of philosophical reasoning in his work, even though he makes it clear that he is a proponent of natural law philosophy in general. However, I believe it is safe to say that he encountered Reid's thought through his close relationship with Cugoano, especially in light of the commonly accepted likelihood that he assisted with the development of *Thoughts and Sentiments* prior to publishing.

²² Ibid. Ch. 12

In my thesis I assert that Thomas Reid's philosophy of Common Sense facilitated the use of accommodationist language and style in the writings of Olaudah Equiano and Ottobah Cugoano. The choice to write in this manner follows logically based on the structure of natural law as Reid saw it. He stated that when other actors exhibit commonly shared rhetorical patterns and logical frameworks, as well as simple similarities in syntax between their languages and ours, it constitutes conclusive evidence that they not only possess free will but are also deserving of equal treatment and rights. These first principles formed the basis of his theory regarding the universally shared human nature.

If my historical evidence is correct, it is clear to me that Equiano and Cugoano believed in Reid's natural law framework and were appealing to the British public on the basis of his logic. They were demonstrating that they were capable of engaging with the English people in a style of speech to which they were accustomed and using arguments that they would acknowledge as sound (economic, religious, etc...) as a means of acquiring their goal of being acknowledged as equal human beings deserving of natural rights.

My big picture goal with this project is to revisit natural law philosophy from a modern perspective, taking note of the good it has provided in the past and finding applications for it within the 21st century intellectual landscape. While much has changed since the days of Thomas Aquinas, there is a growing understanding of human

innate characteristics that has led some of today's leading progressive philosophers, including Noam Chomsky and Sam Harris, to speculate regarding a universal human framework of ethics. Chomsky, famous for demonstrating that human language acquisition is accomplished using a universal, pre-existing, innate linguistic faculty of the mind, has a similar intuition regarding the acquisition of moral values. He had this to say in a discussion on the topic of moral relativism:

You acquire your culture by observing a rather limited number of behaviors and actions and from those constructing somehow in your mind the set of attitudes and beliefs that constitute your culture; but that act is very much like learning a language, developing a visual system or in fact like finding a scientific theory. It's a matter of making a great leap from scattered data to some outcome and that leap is made essentially the same way by all individuals...and its only possible if you have extensive, built in, innate structure. Just as you can develop a human rather than an insect visual system only if it is guided by genetic instructions- very specific ones- the same is true of acquisition of language, acquisition of arithmetical capacity, acquisition of culture and hence acquisition of moral values." ²³

Chomsky is positing here that perhaps there is something to the acquisition of moral values which transcends culture after all, contrary to the cultural relativists. Much like he argued for a universal linguistic substrate, he believes there is a universal moral substrate as well. Both are mediated by culture to some extent, but they have innate properties which are shared universally. These innate properties sound quite similar in principle to Thomas Reid's common sense first principles; should they both exist they would certainly qualify. This is intriguing because Chomsky is writing from a modern

²³ *Chomsky & Cie*, directed by Olivier Azam and Daniel Mermet (2008, France, Les Mutins de Pangée).
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i63_kAw3WmE&t=300s

secular perspective, but coming up with a model that strongly resembles the natural law.

Sam Harris, another secular philosopher and neuroscientist, also makes a case against moral relativism, saying,

Science can, in principle, help us understand what we should do and should want—and, perforce, what other people should do and want in order to live the best lives possible. My claim is that there are right and wrong answers to moral questions, just as there are right and wrong answers to questions of physics, and such answers may one day fall within reach of the maturing sciences of mind.²⁴

Again, it is simply fascinating to hear of a project from a secular perspective that is setting out to validate what appear to be first principles of natural law. While neither Chomsky or Harris' views on moral systems have made it into the mainstream philosophical community, their existence encourages me that there may be a possibility of renewed discussion surrounding the topic of natural law. This body of philosophy that has produced so many desirable results within human society may yet hold answers for the future. Our increasingly polarized political climate could certainly use some accommodation, as what used to be nuanced political categories have condensed into totally oppositional, tribal camps with a rigid party platform. So, in closing, I would like

²⁴ Sam Harris. "Moral confusion in the name of "science", *Project Reason*, Mar 29, 2010.
<https://samharris.org/moral-confusion-in-the-name-of-science/>

to say that I hope my project can contribute to reviving the discussion surrounding natural law by linking it more closely with another important facet of civil rights history.

Bibliography:

Equiano, Olaudah, 1745-1797. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or, Gustavus Vassa, the African*, (Broadview Press, 2001).

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/15399/15399-h/15399-h.htm>

Cugoano, Ottobah. *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and wicked traffic of the slavery: and commerce of the human species, humbly submitted to the inhabitants of Great-Britain*, (1791).

<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eccodemo/K046227.0001.001/1:5?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>

Barton, Mukti. "Was Paul an Arch-Advocate of Slavery or a Liberator?", *Black Theology, Slavery and Contemporary Christianity: 200 Years and No Apology*, Edited by Anthony G. Reddie, (Routledge, 2016). <https://books.google.com/books?id=p0MHDAAAQBAJ&>

[ppis= e&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=p0MHDAAAQBAJ&ppis=e&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false)

[e](https://books.google.com/books?id=p0MHDAAAQBAJ&ppis=e&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false)

Caldwell, Tanya. "Talking Too Much English": Languages of Economy and Politics in Equiano's

"The Interesting Narrative", *Early American Literature*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (1999), pp. 263-282. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25057168>

Reid, Thomas. *Inquiry and Essays*, Edited by Ronald E. Beanblossom and Keith Lehrer, (Hackett Publishing Co., 1983). <https://books.google.com/books?id=KLJDOhNEcEIC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>

Coffey, John. "The abolition of the slave trade: Christian conscience and political action", *The Cambridge Papers*, (Jubilee Centre, June 2006). <http://www.jubilee-centre.org/the-abolition-of-the-slave-trade-christian-conscience-and-political-action-by-john-coffey/>

Boulukos, George E. "Olaudah Equiano and the Eighteenth-Century Debate on Africa", *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (Winter, 2007), pp. 241-255. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/30053452.pdf>