Anthony Benezet and the
Natural Rights of the Negro

In 1775 the Quaker abolitionist Anthony Benezet attacked leaders from slaveholding colonies for driving the country to war in the name of freedom, liberty, and the natural rights of man. He wrote to Elias Boudinot: "But how strange it is to see the southern Colonies take such a lead, in what they call the cause of liberty, whilst the most horrible oppressions even under the Sanction of their Laws, is continually practiced amongst them. . . ." Here was a raw nerve exposed, a tender contradiction in the revolutionist’s arguments which Benezet would stress so hard in his crusade against slavery. If a patriot could prefer death over the Crown's infringements of his liberty, what about the Catos and Pompeys sweating in his fields? If a revolutionist was by the law of nature free, what about those men and women who had lost most of their freedoms?

It is this aspect of Anthony Benezet's literary attack on the institution of slavery—his assertion of the great semantical relationship between the revolutionary ideology of natural rights and slavery—which advanced his thesis beyond familiar religious argu-

1 Propagandist, teacher, writer, organizer, the Philadelphia Quaker Anthony Benezet worked fervently throughout the period of the American Revolution against the institution of slavery. Writing numerous pamphlets, books, and articles, contributing to various Quaker reform efforts, petitioning colonial legislatures, accumulating and distributing contemporary antislavery writings and maintaining a close correspondence with most of the British abolitionists, Benezet exerted a very significant influence on the eighteenth-century abolition movement. There is still a need, however, for an adequate biography of Benezet. The most recent attempt, George Brookes, Friend Anthony Benezet (Philadelphia, 1937), provides much information relating to Benezet’s work among the Quaker sect, such as his teaching career in a school for black children in Philadelphia and his assistance in the Quakers' relations with the Indians. The book also provides a long section of Benezet’s correspondence. A very early biography, Roberts Vaux, Memoirs of the life of Anthony Benezet (Philadelphia, 1817), has only a minimal amount of information. For a discussion of Benezet's antislavery activities among the Quakers, see Thomas Drake, Quakers and Slavery in America (New Haven, 1950).

2 Benezet to Elias Boudinot, Apr. 17, 1775, Boston Public Library.
ments. Although he emphasized constantly and passionately the theological injunctions against slavery, and although his thought represents, as Frederick B. Tolles observed, the “radical social ethics implicit in the Quaker faith,” Benezet tried also to meet the problem of slavery in the terms of Enlightenment ideas of natural law and the natural rights of man.

It is not within the scope of this discussion to try to trace the developing use of natural law and ideas of liberty and human rights forcibly presented by so many writers in Revolutionary America. It is enough to say that American thinkers had been exposed to ideas of a priori commands of legalism and moralism which became familiar to Americans in the period of the Revolution. From Coke to the Revolution of 1688 to Blackstone, natural rights ideas had protected men from tyranny, infringement of individual rights, and exploitation. Such refined abstract reasoning and its emphasis on human rights advanced in arguments by numerous American writers in the period of the Revolution, and typified in the Declaration of Independence, was an intellectual development very significant as well as convenient to antislavery enthusiasts, especially to Anthony Benezet.

Grounded in the assumption that man, with his reason, can discover the genuine and desirable order of society, an order prescribed by natural law, the Declaration of Independence and other contemporary political tracts claimed that men were naturally in a state of freedom and liberty. This abstract assumption, which men such as Benezet accepted so literally, led writers and thinkers to a discussion of “Man”—his nature and his place in the world. Whether or not this focus upon man’s nature was merely windowdressing against the practical political grievances charged to the English king is not important in this context. The importance of the natural rights appeal in the numerous declarations, articles, pamphlets, speeches and broadsides lies in its implications for future political and social creeds—what men thought these ideas meant or what they wanted them to mean. If the human rights appeal was only in some men’s eyes semantical baggage or excess verbiage, it was

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and would be inextricably tied to an impetus toward social reform and especially the movement against slavery.\(^5\)

It is true that some of the most respected philosophers who grounded their own theories in natural law supported the institution of slavery. Hugo Grotius defended slavery as harmonious with natural justice and as an institution willed by God.\(^6\) The venerable John Locke, the great advocate of inalienable rights, had written in 1699, "every freeman of Carolina shall have absolute power and authority over his negro slaves. . . ."\(^7\) From Hobbes to Voltaire to Mirabeau, many Enlightenment thinkers accepted slavery in terms of tradition, rational order and equilibrium, "natural" practices of subordination, private property, and ideas of slowly evolving institutional progress.

It was, however, in the spirit of Montesquieu's discussions concerning slavery in \(L'\text{\^e}sp\text{\^i}rit des lois\) that antislavery ideas received a great amount of attention in the years of the Revolution. Montesquieu had written, "But as all men are born equal, slavery must be accounted unnatural. . . ."\(^8\) The great logical relationship between the ideology of the Revolution and antislavery was one which was obvious and which drew a great amount of attention in this period. The subject was debated at the College of Philadelphia in 1768 and at Harvard in 1773. It was the focus of a pamphlet debate in Philadelphia in 1773.\(^9\) In newspapers and speeches the ideas of freedom and liberty and inalienable rights were applied to the slave.

James Otis, drawing the logical connection between the rights of the colonists and the rights of the Negroes, wrote: "The colonists are by the law of nature free born, as indeed all men are, white or black. . . ."\(^10\) Thomas Paine, writing in the \textit{Pennsylvania Journal} in

\(^5\) In the period of the American Revolution various laws protecting women and children were enacted. The number of offenses punishable by death were reduced. There was a new public interest in penology and the problems of poverty as well as tracts written against such perplexing subjects as war and alcoholism. See Michael Kraus, "Eighteenth Century Humanitarianism," \textit{Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography}, LX (1936), 270-272.

\(^6\) David Brion Davis, \textit{The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture} (Ithaca, 1966), 114-115.

\(^7\) \textit{Ibid.}, 118-119.


\(^9\) Davis, 408.

\(^10\) \textit{The Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved} (Boston, 1764), 29.
1775, maintained that slavery was "contrary to the light of nature" and that slaves had a "natural, perfect right" to freedom. Patrick Henry, who several times expressed his own philosophical aversion to the institution of slavery, was himself the target of appeals based on the slaves' natural right to freedom. When Samuel Allinson called for "a candid consideration ... when all inhabitants of North America are groaning under unconstitutional impositions destructive of their liberty," he was referring to the glaring inconsistency of a slaveholding nation demanding freedom. When Robert Pleasants suggested to Henry that "we ought first to have cleansed our own hands before we could consistently oppose the measures of others," he was referring to the same thing.

This whole discussion was certainly not lost to Anthony Benezet. With political essays and declarations extolling "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness," with all the nonimporting and non-exporting, with all the demands for freedom, abolitionists such as Benezet were suggesting that perhaps certain of those politicians and philosophers who were expounding so forcefully on the subjects of freedom and liberty were finding it a mite easier to pursue happiness with a large plantation and a good stock of slaves. Benezet suggested that any American clamoring for political freedom would be in an untenable moral position. The Quaker, hardly a child of the Enlightenment, wrote:

Will not Americans, amongst whom the establishment of religious as well as civil liberty is the present and great object of consideration & debate, be a witness against themselves, so long as they continue to keep their Fellow-Inhabitants in such grievous circumstances, whereby they are not only deprived of their liberty, but of all property & indeed of every right whatsoever.

12 Allinson to Henry, Oct. 17, 1774, Quaker Collection, Haverford College Library.
Denying from some men all of their rights certainly did not argue well for a man demanding freedom from Britain’s parliamentary control. Benezet observed:

At a time when the general rights and liberties of mankind, and the preservation of those valuable privileges transmitted to us from our ancestors, are become so much the subjects of universal consideration; can it be an inquiry indifferent to any, how many of those who distinguish themselves as the Advocates of Liberty, remain insensible and inattentive to the treatment of thousands and tens of thousands of our fellow men, who, from motives of avarice, and the inexorable degree of tyrant custom, are at this very time kept in the most deplorable state of slavery, in many parts of the Br. Dominions.¹⁵

Benezet had listened to men such as Samuel Adams, Paine, Otis and Jefferson. The Whig ideals of liberty must have long appealed to his Quaker sense of equality. He obviously would not support a war, but, although he found much of the political argument nonsense, he could find basic positive value in the pamphlets, articles, and tracts that poured from the Revolutionary press. He wrote, “Indeed, nothing can more clearly and positively militate against the slavery of the Negroes, than the several declarations lately published that ‘all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights.’”¹⁶

When Benezet referred to natural rights arguments in his anti-slavery writings, he was not accepting familiar Revolutionary ideology or Enlightenment rationalism. He found comfort in the Revolutionary expressions of liberty and equality, but the secularism, empiricism, and the worship of “Man” in this period had to offend a rigid Quaker. He was hardly one to go gazing in a telescope to marvel at the wonders of a universe structured by a “Prime Mover,” or to dwell on the ultimate perfectability of mankind. His God was still the God that had moved George Fox and Robert Barclay, and his ultimate salvation was still in his Quaker religion and not in the movements of the moon in orbit or in the reflected light of a prism. When new scientific discoveries fueled the confidence of Enlightenment thinkers, Benezet would only marvel at


¹⁶ *Serious Considerations*, 28.
God's handiwork. Whereas a Locke would argue against innate ideas, Benezet would argue for the "works of the law... written in their hearts." When an intellectual community was applauding the virtues of reason, Benezet was still talking about revelation.

To Benezet slaveholding was still basically the sin it had been when those few Germantown Quakers from Kreisheim had drawn up their antislavery protest in 1688. It was still the offense against God that the old hunchbacked abolitionist Benjamin Lay had waged his bizarre campaign against much earlier. It would always remain for Benezet primarily a religious question. With all the debate and discussion of natural rights and natural law, however, and with a large segment of the American population thinking and talking in abstractions, Benezet was able to incorporate into his antislavery thesis much of the prevailing Enlightenment sentiment and was able to broaden effectively the appeal of his arguments. He took natural rights arguments about as far as he could while remaining firm in his basic Quaker beliefs.

With words sounding very much like the Declaration of Independence, he charged, "Liberty is the right of every human creature, as soon as he breathes the vital air. And no human law can deprive him of that right, which he derives from the law of nature." In his characteristic writing style of endlessly listing quotation after quotation, he included a line from George Wallis' System of the Laws of Scotland which affirmed that "men and their Liberty are not either saleable or purchaseable... this is the law of nature, which is oblig-


18 These immigrants from Germany declared that buying, selling, and holding men in slavery was "irreconcilable with the precepts of the Christian religion." Warning that prospective immigration from Holland and Germany would be impeded into Pennsylvania by the knowledge of slavery's existence there, they presented their protest to the monthly meeting of Quakers at Dublin, Pennsylvania. The Burlington Yearly Meeting forestalled any positive action. See Albert C. Applegarth, Quakers in Pennsylvania (Baltimore, 1892), 70; Drake, 11-12; Arthur Spaid, "Slavery in Pennsylvania," American Historical Register (1895), 1186.

19 A sometime farmer, storekeeper, and bookkeeper, Lay once kidnapped a slaveholder's son to show the father how his Negro slaves must feel. His wild activities at Quaker meetings resulted in his disownment, but he managed, while living in a cave outside Philadelphia, to write a scathing denunciation of Quakers and ministers who held slaves entided All Slave-Keepers that keep the Innocent in Bondage: Apostates. Drake, 44-46; Herbert Aptheker, "The Quakers and Negro Slavery," The Journal of Negro History, XXV (1940), 345.

20 Notes on the Slave Trade (Philadelphia, 1781), 8.
atory on all men, at all times and in all places.”

He quoted Francis Hutchison, who wrote in his *System of Moral Philosophy* that “each man is the original proprietor of his own liberty.” He even unearthed a statement from the writings of Xoanby Xoas, one of the disciples of Confucius, who had written that “all men live and if possible all live happy,” and that it was “the right of every human creature to enjoy all that which good and wise nature has produced.”

Frederick B. Tolles has pointed out that the Quakers recognized no cleavage between divine and natural law. As Anthony Benezet wrote in 1768, “There is no distinction of civil & religious matters, but in every capacity we equally serve & are called... in whatsoever we do to serve the Lord Jesus Christ.” When Benezet spoke of “nature” and “natural rights” he was referring to the essential order of the world as ruled by divine reason. He described it as “heavenly law and divine government.”

Enlightenment thought stressed the importance of each individual’s autonomous will. This absolute independence of ego necessarily led to contradictory claims of what was a right and of what right superseded another when they clashed. The slaveholder’s “right” to his private property in slaves, for example, was a very difficult problem for abolitionists to challenge. To Benezet, such conflicts would seem to come only from self-interested misconceptions of the divine commands or a refusal to listen to them. The Quaker apologist, Robert Barclay, had expressed the classic Quaker conviction of the “Inner Light,” whereby men are made aware of this “heavenly law,” when he wrote, “Christ is in all men as in a seed, yea, and that he never is nor can be separate from that holy pure seed and Light which is in all men.” He added, “for this divine revelation, and inward illumination, is that which is evident

21 Quoted in *A Caution and Warning*, 23.
22 Ibid., 24.
23 Benezet to Moses Brown, November, 1773, Quaker Collection, Haverford College Library.
24 Tolles, 9–10.
26 *Serious Considerations*, 7.
27 *An Apology for the True Christian Divinity* (New York, 1827), 143.
and clear of itself, forcing, by its own evidence and clearness, the well-disposed understanding to assent.”

In Benezet’s writings there are passages which very much reflect this simple religious notion of the innate divine knowledge in all men, a notion that had, of course, drawn so much scorn from the Puritan community. He talks of the “law of truth” within every man, “the spirit that is within us,” “the inward principle of divine intelligence”—all equally applicable to white, Negro, and Indian.

The institution of slavery, in Benezet’s eyes, was a tragic affront to the unconditional freedom and liberty given to each human being. The right to be responsible under God, the right to one’s physical body, the right to pursue a rational and moral life, and the right to cultivate one’s mind and talents were denied under slavery. Man’s right to himself, the most inviolable right, was torn from the slave, his free will as a rational, thinking, feeling individual destroyed. Benezet wrote, “God gave to man dominion over the fish of the sea and over the fowls of the air, and over the cattle but imposed no involuntary subjection of one man to another.”

He referred to the “superior property or right” of the slave to the fruits of his labor, and “especially to his own person.” Any involuntary slavery of other individuals, people “as free as ourselves by nature & equally with us the objects of redeeming grace,” was an intolerable violation of his natural rights under God. Benezet recognized absolutely no situation in which the institution of slavery was justifiable. He wrote, “It cannot be, that either war or contract can give any man such a property in another as he has in his sheep and oxen: Much less is it possible that any child of man should ever be born a slave.”

28 Ibid., 19.
29 A Short Account of the People called Quakers; Their Rise, Religious Principles and Settlement in America (Philadelphia, 1763), 14; Some Serious and Awful Considerations to All, particularly the Youth in a Representation of the Uncertainty of a Death-Bed Repentance (Philadelphia, 1769), 19.
30 A Caution and Warning, 22.
31 Some Historical Account of Guinea, Its Situation, Produce and the general Disposition of its Inhabitants With An inquiry into the Rise and Progress of the Slave-Trade, its Nature and lamentable Effects (Philadelphia, 1771), 95.
32 Benezet to David Barclay, Apr. 29, 1767, in possession of R.Q. Gurney, Bawdeswell Hall, East Dereham, Norfolk, England.
33 Notes on the Slave Trade, 82.
Benezet looked to government as the protector of human rights: "Government is the ordinance of God, a compact and agreement of a number of people, mutually to support justice and order amongst themselves. . . ."\(^{34}\) This interpretation of the compact theory, a further assertion by Benezet of the divine ordering of the world, saw the state with the moral function of promoting equal rights under God and protecting natural liberties.

Benezet claimed that the design of the institution of government was "for a terror to evil-doers," most especially to those who bought and sold human beings. In this sense, government, conceived by God, should be essentially a powerful agent for moral reform in the country. This accounts for Benezet's persistent personal pleading and nagging with state officials, his saying over and over again that ignorance of the situation must be the reason that government tolerated slavery. He was amazed that such a practice could exist under the eye, indeed under the sanction, of a powerful English government.\(^{35}\)

How an evil of so deep a dye has so long not only passed unnoticed, but has even had the Countenance of the Government, and been supported by Law, is surprizing, and must in a great measure have arisen, from that, our late & present gracious Kings & many worthy men in Government, in whose power it would have been to have put a stop to the Trade, have been unacquainted with the corrupt motives which gives life to it . . . or we should not, I think, I may venture to say we could not, have so long continued in a Practice so inconsistent with the british apprehension of what we owe to the rights & Liberties of mankind.\(^{36}\)

\(^{34}\) Plainness and Innocent Simplicity, 14.

\(^{35}\) The Case of our Fellow Creatures, the Oppressed Africans, Respectfully Recommended to the Serious Consideration of the Legislature of Great Britain by the People called Quakers (London, 1783), 8. In 1772 a proslavery writer, Thomas Thompson, attempted to prove that the slave trade was consistent with principles of humanity and not contrary to the law of nature. Both Granville Sharp, the British abolitionist, and Benezet were especially disturbed by this publication. See note in Granville Sharp Letter Book, York Minster Library, Dean's Park, York, England. In Benezet's copy of Thompson's book, there is, scribbled in one of the margins in Benezet's hand, this statement: "absolute freedom can only consist in restraining Evil Doers by just & equitable Laws, that the Weak & Poor may be as free as the Rich & Strong for all men ought to be absolutely free to do good according to their ability. . . ." Copy of Thomas Thompson, The African Trade for Negro Slaves, Shewn to be Consistent with Principles of Humanity, and with the Laws of Revealed Religion (Canterbury, England, 1772), margin, 23, Rutgers University Library, New Brunswick, N. J.

\(^{36}\) Benezet to Joseph Phipps, May 28, 1763, Spriggs MSS, Friends House Library.
Just as he proposed liquor prohibition in 1779, saying that men often do not know their own minds, he cajoled and needled legislators with an unremitting supply of pamphlets and letters documenting the atrocities of slavery in the futile hope that an informed government would legislate it out of existence.

When Anthony Benezet appealed to natural rights in his antislavery writings, he was using the abstract generalizations of the Revolutionary period only to support familiar religious arguments. The careful discussions, however, of personal liberty and human rights held up in the speeches of Revolutionary philosophers and agitators and debated in the public press, became incisive instruments for reformers and abolitionists, especially Benezet. The Founding Fathers obviously did not have Pompey in mind when they discussed liberty and equality, but the discussion itself gave abolitionists a great philosophical wedge. Benezet tried to use this advantage. In attempting to relate natural law to antislavery, while at the same time remaining firm in basic Quaker beliefs, he struggled to offer an antislavery thesis which Americans of his period would more likely accept. If his logic is sometimes strained, he did, nevertheless, forcefully challenge revolutionaries who were calling for freedom from tyranny while they were filling their plantations with black merchandise.

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37 The Mighty Destroyer Displaced, In some Account of the Dreadful Havock made by the mistaken Use as well as Abuse of Distilled Spirituous Liquors (Trenton, 1779), 43.