

Submission from W.A. Hart (Emeritus, University of Ulster) January 2023

Thoughts on Handel, Hume and Berkeley, and slavery

Handel

Handel traded shares in the Royal African Company which was involved in the slave trade.

However the Royal African Company traded in other commodities, e.g., 'elephant's teeth' (ivory), gold and dyewood, and there is no evidence that Handel knew of its involvement in the slave trade.

David Hunter, the researcher who discovered evidence of Handel's investments in the RAC, and has shown that the musical life of eighteenth-century England was supported by patrons who enjoyed profits made from the slave trade, says nothing about how these facts should affect our commemoration of Handel as a composer.

Hume

Wrote that African blacks were inherently inferior to whites and incapable of higher intellectual, moral and cultural achievements. His view was disputed by some of his Scottish contemporaries, e.g. James Beattie, but Hume never revised his judgement or apologised for it.

He advised his patron Lord Hertford on the purchase of a slave plantation in the West Indies and lent money to a friend for a similar purpose, and seems to have had no qualms about either transaction.

His criticisms of Roman *domestic* slavery (in his essay on the Populousness of Ancient Nations) strike me as peculiar in their emphasis on the evils to the slave *and* the master of their *proximity* to one another rather than the evils of slavery as such: the fact that domestic slaves are directly and constantly subjected to the impositions of the master, and the master is personally involved in the cruelties needed to impose his will on his slaves.

One of his most famous sayings is that 'reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions'. Philosophers generally consider this to be simply a metaphor, and that all Hume meant was that reason could only give guidance as to the *means* of pursuing desirable ends or goals. In other words, that it was not, and could not be, an independent guide to what is desirable or ought to be pursued, whose source lay in man's passions or desires.

But metaphors have a way of betraying more than a writer consciously intends. I think it says something about Hume's lack of interest in contemporary slavery that he could use it for dramatic effect as a metaphor for the appropriate relation of reason to the passions.

Edinburgh University has renamed what was formerly known as the David Hume Tower, where I was a philosophy postgrad in the 1960s, as 40 George Square.

Berkeley

Berkeley, to the best of my knowledge, never expressed any view about the inherent intellectual, moral and cultural inferiority of black people. Indeed you might argue that his scheme to set up a college in Bermuda to train North American Indians (and black slaves?) to be Christian missionaries to their own people implied that the students were capable of intellectual and moral development.

As I see it, the main charge against him is that he purchased a farm/plantation on Rhode Island, to finance his Bermuda college, and a number of black slaves to work on it. It would be some mitigation if he freed his slaves on his return to Ireland, but I know of no evidence that he did so. On the contrary, he seems to have left the farm and its slaves to Yale University as a standing source of income for scholarships.

Berkeley has been criticized for arguing that slaves, if baptized, would thereby be better, more obedient and conscientious slaves, that the freedom of the Gospel was consistent with the condition of slavery. However I don't think this means that he supported slavery. I think one could see it as an *argumentum ad hominem* directed at the slave-owners, challenging their belief that the baptism of their slaves, which was Berkeley's primary object, would make them more independent and recalcitrant. It was an argument, possibly disingenuous, in favour of baptizing the slaves, not an argument in favour of slavery.