

Equiano and Human Liberty

Cogitatio

Locke argues for freedom from “autocratic control” (I.1.c) to “those social and political freedoms which are considered to be . . . civil [liberties]” (*OED* I.1.c, I.2.c). In other words, Locke desires the common liberties of a society that have been established by a “settled, known law, received and allow by common consent” by a “known and indifferent judge” and upheld by “power to back and support the sentence when right” (NAEL 963). He demonstrates his desire for such “[rights] enjoyed by prescription” when he says, “‘tis not without reason that he seeks out and is willing to join in society with others who are already united or have a mind to unite for the mutual preservation of their lives, liberties, and estates. . .” (*OED* II.6.a; NAEL 963).

Similarly, Astell contends for a wife’s freedom from “arbitrary, despotic. . . control” by her husband under “*a standing rule*,” that is, an “immunity or right enjoyed by prescription” (or common law)—a freedom to be gained and kept within the bounds of marriage (*OED* I.1.c, I.2.c; NAEL 966, 967). Astell clearly insists on such liberty when she says, “the essence of freedom consists. . . in having *a standing rule to live by*,” by which statement she points to Locke, agrees with his assessment, and criticizes him and other men in her society which hypocritically contend for such freedoms from autocratic government (NAEL 967).

Equiano fights for “freedom. . . from slavery” for freedoms and “[rights] enjoyed by prescription,” and the “civil [liberties]” for which Locke fervently contends (*OED* I.1.b, I.2.c, II.6.a). In other words, Equiano wants the liberty “to act. . . without. . . restraint” and “power to do as one likes” under a “settled, known law” (*OED* I.2.a; NAEL 963). Although his argument is implied by the entire narrative of his story, Equiano especially highlights his argument when he

says, “O, ye nominal Christians! . . . learned you this from you God, who says unto you, Do unto all mean as you would men should do unto you” (NAEL 986).

Meditatio

Equiano aims principally to argue for freedom from slavery on behalf of enslaved humans, with an aim toward freedom under common civil liberties and rights founded upon prescriptive laws (NAEL 986; *OED* I.1.b, I.2.c, II.6.a). Through his story, Equiano shows that no one should be under the “absolute power and dominion [that] one man claims over his fellow” (NAEL 990).

There are two stages in Equiano’s story, with two kinds of appeal to mark the stages. The first stage encapsulates Equiano’s time on the ship to the time when he is sold (NAEL 982-86). The story’s second stage narrates Equiano’s move to glorious freedom (NAEL 986-990). The narrative begins by demonstrating the degradation of the image of God in humanity—particularly in Africans—and moves in the second stage to illustrate, through the purchase of freedom, the restoration of the image of God. Equiano never lost the image of God, but when he bought his freedom, it served as a declaration that he always had it to begin with.

The first stage also reveals Equiano’s first appeal—that of pathos—where he appeals to his audience’s emotions while he recounts his experiences aboard a slave ship in detail (NAEL 982-86). At the conclusion of the stage, Equiano makes a second appeal to his audience’s convictions and consciences, calling them “nominal Christians” and referencing Jesus’ teaching, “learned you this from you God, who says unto you, Do unto all mean as you would men should do unto you” (NAEL 986). With his statement, Equiano—aware that the majority of his audience professed Christianity—pleads with them on the foundation of their beliefs and values, and thus

strikes at both conscience and conviction. He makes his third appeal, found in the second stage of his argument, to the audience's emotions (albeit subtly) by building up his story's tension as he describes the process by which he earned the money to buy his freedom and by portraying his jubilance when he is free, Equiano captures his audience's emotions and allows them to feel along with him (NAEL 986-90).

Equiano's chronological, biographical account builds upon itself as he traces a biographical account of his personal experience of the horrors of slavery to the point of his glorious freedom. Consequently, Equiano's story would have a strong impact on his readers, due to both the buildup of tension and emotion and to his entreaty to those sentiments. Moreover, appealing to his audience's convictions and consciences would have the same effect, especially when that appeal lies between two instances of pleading with his audience's feelings. Finally, the biographical nature of Equiano's story, and his record of his work under his master displays a transparency, honesty, intelligence, and diligence, that would earn him credibility with his audience and incline them even further to his point of view.

Ruminatio

Equiano aims first and foremost to stir up the English to free their slaves and treat them as the humans they are (NAEL 986). He does so because he values the fair and just treatment of all human beings (NAEL 986, 990). Considering Equiano eventually converted to Methodism, he likely held the belief that all men are created in the image of God and are therefore equal, with inherent dignity and value (NAEL 986-7).

I share both Equiano's belief—that all people are created in the image and likeness of God with inherent dignity and worth—and value, the fair and just treatment of all humans.

Consequently, today my beliefs and values lead me to contend strongly for the humanity of unborn children and against the murder of those children. The congruency of my shared belief and value come from my regard for the Bible and the teachings of Jesus, which Equiano referenced and held in high regard in his narrative (NAEL 986). I find Equiano's writing compelling, and I think such biographical writing would not be out of place today.