

Jorati, Julia. *Slavery and Race: Philosophical Debates in the Eighteenth Century*. New York: Oxford University Press 2023, x + 338 pp.

Reviewed by **Dr. Aminah Hasan-Birdwell**, Emory University, Department of Philosophy, Atlanta, United States of America; ahasanb@emory.edu

<https://doi.org/10.1515/agph-2025-0101>

Jorati's *Slavery and Race: Philosophical Debates in the Eighteenth Century* is a publication suited to its times. In recent years, the legacy of slavery and the presence of systematic racisms embedded in the social and political institutions of Europe and the United States have been interrogated and debated afresh. The academy has not been shielded from these debates and has often been implicated in the history of both racism and slavery. Jorati's work contributes both to twentieth-century philosophical debates over the history of theories of race and racism – which study was largely initiated by philosophers such as Charles Mills and Robert Bernasconi, and historians such as George Fredrickson – and recent work by historians of philosophy who focus on specific philosophers' views on slavery. However, Jorati's method is modest and acutely focused, since the goal of *Slavery and Race* is not to provide a unified or systematic account of theories of race during the time period nor provide a history of the practices of slavery or of the slave trade in the eighteenth century. Instead, the author's research enterprise is motivated by the narratives of formerly enslaved Africans, such as Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, Olaudah Equiano, Absalom Jones, Richard Allen, and others, who argued that their mistreatment was not only severe but singular to Africans. Jorati opens the book with Quobna Ottobah Cugoano's words, stating that enslavement, persecution, and killing of Africans are no less criminal and evil than such treatment would be of a man of "another complexion" (1). Accordingly, for Jorati this mistreatment exceeds the threshold of a general *prejudice* towards enslaved Africans by Europeans; it reflects more concretely a *racism*, despite the term or notion not being used until the nineteenth century.

Racism towards Africans – represented by the severe mistreatment of, prejudices against, and forced enslavement of Black people – is not a result of hatred. Rather, as the author argues, it is an outcome of a conception of an inherent or 'natural' inferiority of Black people. Jorati excavates these debates in an array of texts, including novels, political pamphlets, abolitionist tracts, proslavery apologies, and philosophical treatises. The debates and philosophical discussions treated were not always about human diversity, inferiority of Africans, or justifications of slavery, but were often theological arguments on the soul, definitions of moral and rational faculties, or analyses of the distinction between inherent or learned capacities. Jorati ties these seemingly diverging subjects together under "the doctrine of natural slavery" or "racial natural slavery," which provides a framework to conceptualize racism and slavery alongside canonical concepts found in the history of philosophy (14).

Natural slavery according to Jorati is "a doctrine that it is permissible to enslave individuals or groups who are naturally inferior in specific ways" (9). Although the author explores how the doctrine applies to eighteenth-century debates over slavery, she relates the concept back to Aristotle's *Politics*, which she interprets as arguing that those who lack cognitive abilities required for their own existence or life are by definition natural slaves. Though Jorati acknowledges that Aristotle's notion of natural slaves is not "racial in a modern sense," the author does contend that there are racialized versions of the idea in the early modern period (14). In this regard, I believe the author's core claim is that there is continuity in a paradigm of thinking about slavery, namely that some groups are destined to the institution, and that this paradigm is present within the attempted justifications of enslavement during the eighteenth century, especially when those justifications

were explicitly racialized (21). Methodologically, Jorati's interpretation of the period parallels how the author perceives the persistence of racist thinking, namely that notions of Black inferiority within modern slavery debates are continuous with and contributed to racist thinking in subsequent centuries (21).

Jorati's methodology is reflected in both the book's organization and its ways of connecting various authors, texts, and geographical locations together. Each of its five chapters is centered on a specific geological location that played a role in the slave trade (such as North America, Scotland, England, France), and ends with a brief discussion of slavery and race by Dutch and German philosophers, whose countries were less active in the slave trade. Historically, the texts and debates on slavery that are treated range from 1750 until the 1790s. Surprisingly, a large portion of the texts are of antislavery writers or abolitionists. The first chapter, "North American Debates about Slavery and Race," is distinct since it does not analyze specific philosophers, but focuses on debate points, rhetorical strategies, doctrines, and definitions found in both proslavery and antislavery texts in the Revolutionary Era, ranging from pamphlets to literary fiction to sermons. The authors involved in these early American debates over the transatlantic slave trade were colonists that, as the author argues, were "acutely aware of racism and its effects" (26). Jorati interprets these arguments as expressing fundamental views about Black people and their traits and capacities. From the perspective of the doctrine of natural slavery and the author's assessment of this period in America, the debates over the practice of slavery and the freedom of previously enslaved individuals were not centered on the economic or moral issues per se, but on whether the institution should be defended given the humanity of Africans. As a result, all other justifications would be merely supplemental.

Abolitionist and antislavery appeals to equality, Jorati argues, were framed within the paradigms of natural slavery and racism as well (28–42). For example, antislavery writers like Andrew Eliot (1718–1778), a minister, applied the unified soul or same-soul doctrine – which was a theological notion independent of the subject of racial differences – to enslaved Africans, to argue that despite the effects of the conditions of their enslavement, such as alleged crudeness of character, or traits such as a dark complexion, they had a rational and immaterial soul. The author claims that Eliot, like many others, used what Jorati calls "the same-capacities strategy" in antislavery arguments. That strategy held that there is no essential difference of capacities among people of different races. The strategy is significant because it contested the leading theories of human difference and racialized justifications of slavery during the time (50). But the author contends that this rhetorical move also undermined the notion that Black people are natural slaves. Specifically, it rejected the normative claim that the presence of certain mental qualities (or lack thereof) makes someone more conducive to or fit for slavery. By undermining the normative claim, they also dismiss, or at least do not attend to, the descriptive claim that Black people are mentally inferior. In other words, while the "same-capacities" strategy sought to undermine the relevance of alleged inferior capacities for justifying slavery, it did not undermine the assumption of inferiority that underlay the doctrine of natural slavery, and in this sense, Jorati argues, the strategy was still implicated in the doctrine. Furthermore, although these authors (antislavery and proslavery) of the period are often more concerned with environmental conditions instead of essential qualities, Jorati maintains that these types of arguments adopt an "effects-of-slavery" strategy. While "effects-of-slavery" arguments acknowledged differences between races, those differences were not regarded as permanent but a result of environment and education (see esp. 61–80). None of these different forms of argument mentions the term 'natural slavery,' nor do they reference Aristotle. But, according to the author, they are relevant because they reflect an indirect, partial semblance to the paradigm. Moreover, in other parts of the book the author engages with eighteenth-century American texts

that do directly reference natural slavery (82). There the central examples are Samuel Hopkins (1721–1803), a Calvinist minister, and Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758). Both authors reject natural slavery in different ways than previously discussed. Hopkins's response to natural slavery, as the author observes, “takes the form of a historical comparison” (82). The proclaimed Greek superiority over ‘barbarians’ by philosophers such as Aristotle is false because the categories of inferior and superior are contingent and often change depending on who wins the war. In this sense, Africans that are now deemed “savage” and are enslaved can become “free and eminent” (83).

The subsequent chapters focus more on specific figures in eighteenth-century philosophy than on general debates; however, the method is the same. The more direct or explicit appeals to Aristotelian natural slavery are clearly rejected in natural right theories of the Scottish Enlightenment, such as Francis Hutcheson and Gershom Carmichael discussed in chapter two. The indirect engagement with the doctrine of natural slavery Jorati finds in thinkers such as David Hume, Mary Wollstonecraft, Montesquieu, and Rousseau (to name a few), is explored in chapters three and four. The focus on English abolitionism in chapter three makes a unique contribution to the overall analysis because it focuses on the shared reception of texts and ideas on slavery and race in the United States and England, especially those pertaining to race and slavery. There are, as the author notes, significant differences between these contexts, such as the absence of slave plantations on English soil and the fact that by 1772 in England – in the decision of *Somerset v. Stewart* – it was illegal to forcibly remove enslaved individuals to another territory. According to the author, despite these legal and social-political distinctions, there were repeated and pervasive themes that stretched across the Atlantic. For instance, English abolitionists, like the North Americans, were concerned with the humanity of enslaved Africans (162). Specifically, abolitionists from both continents were arguing against the mistreatment and dehumanization of enslaved Africans, racial biases (that is, beliefs that Black people were subhuman), or the belief that Black people had inferior mental capacities to their European counterparts. The author explores these themes in eight different abolitionist frameworks and authors. These themes are most salient in Jorati's interpretation of Thomas Clarkson (1760–1846) (173).

Clarkson, who was influenced by the works of North American abolitionist Anthony Benezet (1713–1784), wrote *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Particularly the African* (1786). According to Jorati's analysis, that work discusses natural slavery (in its history of slavery), the justifiability of transatlantic slavery, and the treatment of enslaved Africans in the colonies. Although Clarkson in an early section of his argument is concerned with accounting for the history of slavery that follows from warfare and piracy, the author conceives of this discussion as relevant to the doctrine of natural slavery. Slavery by war entails a vicious cycle that “inevitably leads to dehumanization, bias, and abuse” (174). Clarkson does not use the term ‘natural slavery’ or reference Aristotle, but the author perceives the concept operating in his critique of the Greek and Roman pride that leads them to view the enslavement of barbarians and the similar treatment of animals as ordained by nature. Likewise, Jorati perceives the same engagement with the paradigm of natural slavery in Clarkson's (a) reproach to hereditary slavery – a key feature of chattel slavery – and (b) critique of the subjugation of Africans as justified by their natural inferiority. It is evident that Clarkson is speaking more against prejudices towards Africans based on alleged characteristics formed by the conditions of slavery than on perceived innate or inherent qualities. Nevertheless, the author analyzes these instances as contesting a notion of natural slavery based on equality of capacities, thus functioning as a “same-capacities” argument treated in the first chapter.

The final two chapters culminate Jorati's analysis by treating the Francophone, Dutch, and German traditions. In terms of the Francophone tradition, the author cites some important historical developments in late eighteenth-century or Revolutionary-era France, including abolitionist

movements and the problem of slave revolts in the colonies. The chapter focuses on specific texts of philosophers during this period, for example, Montesquieu, the *Encyclopedia* thinkers, Condorcet, and Olympe de Gouges (205). The author sees the doctrine of racial natural slavery endorsed by these thinkers as reflective of the philosophical ideas and debates over slavery during that period. These thinkers, similar to the English, were concerned about the effects of environment on human capacities. But the distinctive characteristic of French thinkers, Jorati argues, is their emphasis on culture and cultivation. In terms of racist attitudes, Voltaire in particular represents a distinctive convergence of notions of race, culture, and capacities. I believe Voltaire is a more compelling case for this conceptual intersection than Rousseau or Montesquieu, for instance, because Voltaire explicitly argues for a racial difference that more closely resembles the nineteenth-century “scientific” racism found in Arthur de Gobineau’s *The Inequality of the Human Races* (1853–1855). The outcome of Voltaire’s discussion is not qualifying distinctions between human beings but constructing hierarchies among the races.

Voltaire takes his analysis further than his predecessors, as he wants to claim some Africans are a distinct species of human beings, therefore rejecting monogenism (235). According to Voltaire, as Jorati notes, the distinguishing feature of the African ‘negroes’ is their language, which he likens to animals, as well as their constitution. However, Jorati’s connection between Voltaire’s racist view and endorsement of a racial natural slavery is not as strong. Voltaire, like other French thinkers, saw slavery as an evil and does not make an explicit statement that racial differences imply racial slavery (239). Jorati argues that there are passages that “suggest” he endorses the doctrine but without decisive evidence. One of these passages referenced by Jorati is his criticism of Africans selling each other into slavery. Jorati interprets Voltaire to be following the logic, “because Africans willingly sell each other into slavery, they must be naturally inferior to Europeans and born to be slaves, that is, meant to be subordinated to human beings” (239). Although there are clear problems in Jorati’s interpretation of Voltaire, aspects of her conclusions on Voltaire are compelling, such as how his explicit endorsement of the polygenist view of race posits “an enormous and unbridgeable gulf between Black and White people” (240).

The final discussion on Kant demonstrates continuity between French and German ideas on race. Like French thinkers, Kant was opposed to the slave trade in many instances, yet his account of racial differences created an unbridgeable gap between the races. This is evident in Kant’s anthropological writings and specifically his account of the differences of skin color amongst the races. Kant’s was one of the first monogenist theories to conceive of skin color as an unchangeable characteristic that corresponded directly to mental capacities. When it comes to the justification of the transatlantic slave trade, Kant’s connection between race and slavery is unclear, at least according to Jorati and other scholars. In his *Towards Perpetual Peace* (1795), Kant explicitly criticizes colonialism and the cruel treatment of enslaved Africans. From this perspective, Kant’s previous descriptions of race and later criticisms of slavery do not seem to fit neatly into a consistent notion of racial natural slavery. Nevertheless, Jorati conceives Kant as sympathetic to racial natural slavery. She maintains this perspective through an engagement with secondary literature complicating the picture that Kant abandoned his racist views. Jorati thinks through the connection between slavery and race with other Kant critics, such as Huaping Lu-Adler and Robert Bernasconi, to demonstrate the continuity of Kant’s racial ideology, showing that even in these later texts he still privileges “the progress of White Europeans” and non-Europeans are still described to be morally unequal to Europeans (305). Kant’s sympathy has limits.

Jorati’s *Slavery and Race* offers an extensively researched overview of discussions of slavery and race in the second half of the eighteenth century. As the author establishes in the introduction, the primary aim of the analysis is to provide readers with an introduction to “philosophically

important texts about slavery from the eighteenth century” (2). However, the more problematic element of the analysis is the author’s method. The author’s emphasis on natural slavery, and its eighteenth-century iteration as racial natural slavery, often appears to be imposed upon the treatment of different texts instead of being a concept arising organically from a specific writer’s argument on its own account. This is most apparent in Jorati’s analysis of British abolitionist and natural law theorists of the period. The application of the racial natural slavery doctrine often obscures or excludes their discussions of slavery by war or the ways slavery violates natural right, which were arguably more salient to the abolitionists than discussions of race. This emphasis could mislead an unseasoned reader into thinking that race was pervasive and monolithic during the period. Moreover, at other instances in the analysis, the author’s broad application of the doctrine required only a semblance, likeness, or appearance of a natural slavery argument, even if a particular philosopher or author never uses the term ‘race’ or ‘natural slavery,’ or is not even directly engaging with an Aristotelian argument. A question to which Jorati’s analysis points, and that calls for further clarification, is what is meant by ‘natural’ as it concerns the doctrine of natural slavery and what eighteenth-century thinkers conceived as nature and natural when it came to race within some justifications of slavery. The historical reality of slavery poses an array of philosophical problems in this period that many scholars have recently begun to recognize. Despite these conceptual limitations, Jorati’s scholarship will spark others to join in the task of reckoning with philosophy’s past.