

Christoph Meiners: A Naturally Conceived Hierarchy of Peoples (1790)

Abstract

Christoph Meiners (1747–1810) was a philosopher and professor in Göttingen. In his treatise “Über die Natur der afrikanischen Neger” [“On the Nature of the African Negroes”], he opposed the abolition of slavery in 1790. In the Enlightenment manner, he linked aesthetic, physical, emotional, creative-cognitive, and moral characteristics to describe “whites” and “Europeans” as superior and to confer upon them the right to power—which they were not supposed to misuse. In warning about Europeans “going native” when they travelled to other parts of the globe, he aired his concerns that whites would eventually dissolve the boundaries that they themselves had drawn.

Source

The growing Enlightenment and the humanity that unfailingly grows with true enlightenment and the cultivation of the mind have in recent times not only spread more correct ideas about the rights and duties of man but have also increased by many degrees the feelings about injustice suffered or continuing, the ill-will toward all oppressors, and the compassion for the oppressed. No wonder, then, that in the very age in which peoples and classes mistreated for too long rose up against their tyrants, called them to account in terrible ways, and loudly demanded back their aggrieved and almost completely forgotten rights; that in this very age the most famous writers of all nations made a covenant, as it were, and sought to pull the Jews in our part of the world and the Negroes in the new world out of the state of contempt and servitude into which both the former and the latter had been plunged. But, when because of the general outcry against that kind of arbitrary violence, the same thing happened that has happened from time immemorial in all similar turmoil: one not only improved but destroyed; one not only punished but avenged; one not only got rid of despots and despotic violence but of all laws and all subordination. The awakening love of freedom degenerated into the storming of princes and nobility, and hatred of oppression devolved into a feverish enthusiasm for an equality of all classes and all peoples that was as impossible as it was unjust. Continuous progress in useful knowledge and free inquiry will also correct this mistake of noble but misguided passions. The humbled princes will certainly regain the power that is due them for the sake of the general good. Just as certainly, the better classes and peoples will regain their privileges, which they deserve on account of their innate or earned superior merit. And just as subjects are scarcely likely to receive the same rights and freedoms as their regents, children as adults, women as men, servants as their masters, lazy and ignorant people as hardworking and educated people, declared villains as innocents or meritorious citizens, likewise Jew and Negroes, as long as they are Jews and Negroes, can scarcely demand the same privileges and liberties as Christians and white people among whom they live or whom they obey. If it is unjust to force oppressive inequalities upon beings who are equal to each other, it is no less unjust to treat as our equals people who nature or some other insurmountable principle makes unequal to each other. And thus sacred nature: It is law that no one has the right to maliciously insult another person, and no one shall have the power to make other people unhappy with impunity. It is also sacred law that, according to the intentions of nature, rights and duties stand in a very precise relationship to one another, and both in the most exact proportion to the powers one possesses to promote one's own and others' good; and that each one should receive just as much as he can give and contribute. He, therefore, who can give less and contribute less than others, cannot without injustice demand so much as these.

According to the first impression that the friends of the Negroes made in England and France, one might have thought that the black slaves would be freed from their bonds in the first months. But the governments, which at first were swayed too far by the clamor of the ardent friends of freedom, have yet to take decisive steps toward the abolition of slavery in the New World, and more accurate inquiries and investigations have shown them indisputably that a sudden, unconditional emancipation would make the greater part of the Negroes unhappy and would likewise ruin the planters and plantation owners. Indeed, one could hardly reason more one-sidedly and superficially than the most zealous opponents of Negro servitude. Opponents are not content to rebuke and exaggerate the abuses that occur in the purchase and ship transport of the Negroes, in their clothing and provisioning, in their work and corporal punishment, and to push for implementing the proposals long since made against these abuses. Instead, opponents want to see Negro servitude completely abolished, and declare it blasphemy to assert that the relationship between master and servant could ever be a natural and lawful one. The slave traders, slave ship owners, and especially the planters in the New World are declared to be criminals of offended humanity whose atrocities will mark the nations to which they belong with an eternal stain and lay a heavy curse upon them. Finally, opponents not only want to place Negroes on equal footing with Europeans or whites, they almost want to elevate them above the most beautiful, intelligent, and noble-minded peoples in our part of the world. [...]

Of all the many false or half-true platitudes that are still considered irrefutable in common life and in writings, and are even used as criteria, none has surprised me so much by its persistence as the platitude that all men are born equal and thus also have the same original rights and duties. The unanimous testimony of all the travelers who have described for us the wild, barbaric, and semi-cultivated peoples in other parts of the world speaks against the proposition that all people are naturally equal. Very ancient and modern history also speak against that proposition; such history teaches that beauty; activity; sensitivity to the beauties of nature and art; inexhaustible inventiveness; arts and sciences; sympathetic feelings of gratitude and remorse, of shame, of vanity, and decency, and all the amiable and admirable virtues arising from these feelings, were just as little present as freedom and wise laws in all parts of the world and among all peoples of the earth. And [history teaches further] that from time immemorial the white and beautiful nations, and predominantly the European nations, conquered with much smaller numbers all the black, red, and brown peoples, and after their subjugation, kept them under control; that the black, brown, and red peoples not only did not invent arts and sciences, but were not even capable of accepting them no matter how long they were offered to them and however easily they were made available; and that among just these peoples the better born individuals are much less [capable] than the incurably stupid, the insane, or the perverts among our population. Finally, the whole analogy to nature, or the harmony of everyday, irrefutable observations argues against the original equality of all peoples. General experience teaches us that there is no mineral, no plant, no tree, and no animal species that is not produced somewhere in its highest perfection, and at some other place, under the influence of less favorable conditions, in a lesser degree of excellence; that when creatures and animals are moved from the climate and the soil in which they best thrive to other, less advantageous circumstances, they then degenerate; and if a high-quality branch is grafted onto an ordinary trunk, and an animal of a better kind is allowed to mix with another of a poorer sort, then the fruits of the former and the offspring of the latter will unfailingly be improved.

[...]

In no other part of the world was man so strong, so active, so brave, and as sensitive to the happiness and misfortune of others, and so rich in arts, sciences, and virtues, as in Europe. When the beautiful, strong, intelligent, brave, and noble-minded European is moved to other parts of the world, he degenerates and loses part of his hereditary strength, activity, courage, humanity, and intelligence. However, if he is mixed with people of different

descent, of a different color, with a different education and tendencies of the mind and heart, he raises the blood of the child above the blood of the mother, imparting to the child by half not only his color, his education, and his remaining physical perfections, but also his great gifts of the mind and heart.

[....]

The person's exterior on average always reflects the interior person, and vice versa.

[....]

The fear that conviction of the superiority of white people over black, red, and brown people could be a reason, or at least an excuse, for the injustices committed by the former against the latter is not entirely a fiction. All the authors confirm that many planters seek to acknowledge abuse of Negroes with [the argument] that the Negroes have no soul and no reason and are not human beings; and all the historians agree that the conquerors of the New World and the East Indian islands and countries sought to justify their atrocities in a similar manner. But the feeling of inborn superiority over the inhabitants of other parts of the world will certainly not be taken from Europeans by constant repetition of the platitude that all people are naturally equal; the platitude is seen outside Europe to be refuted by daily, unerring experiences. It is much better and more certain to prove that the European conquers and rules more because of his mind than his body; and that just because the Negroes, the [Native] Americans, and other similar peoples are in every respect far inferior to him, he has no right to destroy or abuse with brutal malice his brothers who are on a much lower level. He must instead use his greater strengths to make these people better and happier than they would be if left to themselves; rule based on wisdom and kindness works much more to his own advantage than arbitrary, destructive tyranny. In Europe, the original differences between individuals and peoples are not as great as in other parts of the world; experiences constant and the same for everyone have prompted the common-sense sayings: that not only individual people are different from other people in their nature and the extent of their gifts and proclivities, but that excellent external and internal gifts, like natural defects, propagate themselves in certain races. From the oldest time, the division into noble and non-noble races among all the European peoples has been based on the latter observations. Furthermore, the ostensible equality of people has not allowed the non-Slavic European peoples to grant Wends and Jews the same prerogatives that they themselves have, or to consider them equal with themselves, despite the fact that it never occurred to them to make similar distinctions between persons from their own midst and between colonists from other nations with the same origins.

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Source: Christoph Meiners, "Ueber die Natur der Afrikanischen Neger, und die davon abhängende Befreyung, oder Einschränkung der Schwarzen," *Göttingisches Historisches Magazin* 6:3 (1790), pp. 385–456 (excerpts).

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