



Observations Intended to Favour a Supposition That the Black Color (As It Is Called) of the Negroes Is Derived from the Leprosy

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Observations intended to favour a supposition that the Black Color (as it is called) of the Negroes is derived from the LEPROSY. By DR. BENJAMIN RUSH.

Read at a Special Meeting July 14, 1792.

DR. SMITH in his elegant and ingenious Essay upon the Variety of Color and Figure in the Human Species has derived it from four causes, viz. climate, diet, state of society, and diseases. I admit the Doctor's facts, and reasonings as far as he has extended them, in the fullest manner. I shall only add to them a few observations which are intended to prove that the color and figure of that part of our fellow creatures who are known by the epithet of negroes, are derived from a modification of that disease, which is known by the name of Leprosy.

Many facts recorded by historians, as well as physicians show the influence of unwholesome diet in having produced the leprosy in the middle and northern parts of Europe in the 13th and 14th centuries. The same cause, combined with greater heat, more savage manners, and bilious fevers, probably produced this disease in the skin among the natives of Africa. But I will not rest the proofs of the color and figure of the negroes being a leprosy simply upon its causes. Other circumstances make it much more probable. I shall briefly enumerate them.

1. The leprosy is accompanied in some instances with a black color of the skin. Of this I have met with a satisfactory proof in Dr. Theiry's account of the diseases of Asturia in Spain. I shall insert a translation of his own words upon this subject. " There are (says this excellent physician) above twenty hospitals for lepers in this province, and I have observed six species of the disorder.

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One of them, viz. the second, is called the *black albaras* of the Arabians. The skin becomes black, thick and greasy.—There are neither pustules, nor turbercles, nor scales, nor any thing out of the way on the skin. The body is not in the least emaciated. The breathing is a little difficult, and the countenance has some fierceness in it. They exhale perpetually a peculiar and disagreeable smell, which I can compare to nothing but the smell of a mortified limb.”* This smell mentioned by Dr. Theiry continues with a small modification in the native African to this day.

2. The leprosy is described in the Old Testament, and by many ancient writers as imparting a preternatural whiteness to the skin. Persons thus marked, have lately received the name of *albanos*. Solitary instances of this disease are often met with it upon the Alps, but travellers tell us that it is one of the endemics of Java, Guinea and Panama where it is perpetuated through many generations. Mr. Hawkins in his travels into the interior parts of Africa has described the persons afflicted with this disease in the following words. “ They go entirely naked ; their skin is white, but has not that animated appearance so perceptible in Europeans. It has a dull deathlike whitish cast that conveys an idea more of sickness, than of health. Their hair is red, or ashes-coloured, yellowish wool, and their eyes are uniformly white, in that part by which others are distinguished into the black, grey and blue eyes. They are set deep in the head, and very commonly squint, for as their skin is deprived of the black mucous web, the distinguishing characteristic of these Africans, so their eyes are destitute of that black matter resembling a pigment, so universally found in people of all

* Observations de Physique et de Medecine faites en differens lieux de l'Espagne. Vol. ii. p. 130.

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countries, and so useful in preventing the eye from being injured in cases of exposure to strong light.”* This artless traveller does not stop here. The idea of this peculiarity in the color and features of these people being a disease, and even its specific nature did not escape him, hence he adds “ These people rendered unfortunate by the prejudices of their countrymen, are born of black parents ; they have all the features of other inhabitants, but differ from them only in the above circumstances. The difference of color cannot arise from the intercourse of whites and blacks, for the whites are very rarely among them, and the result of this union is well known to be the yellow color, or mulatto. Many of the natives assert that they are produced by the women being debauched in the woods by the large baboon, ourang-outang, and by that species in particular called the guaga mooroos. No satisfactory discovery has been made to account for such singular, but not unfrequent phenomena in the species. It may perhaps be ascribed to *disease*, and that of the *leprous* kind, with more reason than to any other cause that has been yet assigned.”† Mr. Bernardin concurs with Mr. Hawkins in ascribing this morbid whiteness in the skins of the Africans wholly to the leprosy.‡ However opposed it may be to their morbid blackness, it is in strict conformity to the operations of nature in other diseases. The same state of malignant fever is often marked by opposite colors in the stools, by an opposite temperature of the skin, and by opposite states of the alimentary canal.

The original connection of the black color of the negroes with the leprosy is further suggested by the following fact taken from Bougainville’s voyage round the world.§

* P. 116. 117.

† P. 117. 118.

‡ Studies of Nature, vol. ii. p. 2.

§ Page 294.

He tells us that on an island in the Pacific Ocean which he visited, the inhabitants were composed of negroes and mulattoes. They had thick lips, woolly hair, and were sometimes of a yellowish color. They were short, ugly, ill proportioned, and most of them infected with the leprosy, a circumstance from which he called the island they inhabit, the Isle of Lepers.

3. The leprosy sometimes appears with white and black spots blended together in every part of the body. A picture of a negro man in Virginia in whom this mixture of white and black had taken place, has been happily preserved by Mr. Peale in his museum.

4. The leprosy induces a morbid insensibility in the nerves. In countries where the disease prevails, it is common to say that a person devoid of sensibility, has no more feeling than a leper. This insensibility belongs in a peculiar manner to the negroes. Dr. Moseley says, "they are void of sensibility to a surprising degree. They sleep sound in every disease, nor does any mental disturbance ever keep them awake. They bear surgical operations much better than white people, and what would be a cause of insupportable pain to a white man, a negro would almost disregard. I have amputated the legs of many negroes, who have held the upper part of the limb themselves."* This morbid insensibility in the negroes discovers itself further in the apathy with which they expose themselves to great heat, and the indifference with which they handle coals of fire.

5. Lepers are remarkable for having strong venereal desires. This is universal among the negroes, hence their uncommon fruitfulness when they are not depressed by slavery; but even slavery in its worst state does not always subdue the venereal appetite, for after whole days, spent in hard

* Treatise upon Tropical Diseases, p. 475.

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labor in a hot sun in the West Indies, the black men often walk five or six miles to comply with a venereal affignation.

6. The big lip, and flat nose so universal among the negroes, are symptoms of the leprosy. I have more than once seen them in the Pennsylvania hospital.

7. The woolly heads of the negroes cannot be accounted for from climate, diet, state of society, or bilious diseases, for all those circumstances, when combined have not produced it in the natives of Asia and America who inhabit similar latitudes. Wool is peculiar to the negro. Here the proofs of similarity in the symptoms of leprosy, and in the peculiarities of the negro body appear to fail, but there is a fact in the history of the leprosy which will probably throw some light upon this part of our subject. The *Trichoma*, or *Plica Polonica* of the Poles is a symptom of leprosy. This is evident not only from the causes which originally produced it, but from its symptoms as described in a late publication by F. L. De La Fontaine.* From this fact it would seem that the leprosy had found its way to the covering of the head, and from the variety of its effects upon the skin, I see no difficulty in admitting that it may as readily have produced wool upon the head of a negro, as matted hair upon the head of the Poles.

But how shall we account for the long duration of this color of the skin through so many generations and even ages? —I answer—1. That the leprosy is the most durable in its descent to posterity, and the most indestructible in its nature of any disease we are acquainted with. In Iceland Dr. Van Troil tells us, it often disappears in the second and third, and appears in the fourth generation.† 2dly. No more happens here than what happens to many nations

* Surgical and medical treatises upon various subjects respecting Poland.

† Letters on Iceland, p. 122.

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who are distinguished by a peculiarity of figure, in any part of the body. Many of the inhabitants of the highlands of Scotland, have the same red hair, and the same high cheek bones which are ascribed to their ancestors by Tacitus after the invasion of Britain. Even the tumors in the throat in the Cretins who inhabit the Alps, are transmitted from father to son, through a long succession of generations. Madness, and consumption in like manner are hereditary in many families, both of which occupy parts of the body, much more liable to change in successive generations, than the skin.

Should it be objected to this theory that the leprosy is an infectious disorder, but that no infectious quality exists in the skin of the negro, I would reply to such objection by remarking in the first place, that the leprosy has in a great degree ceased to be infectious, more especially from contact, and secondly that there are instances in which something like an infectious quality has appeared in the skin of a negro. A white woman in North Carolina not only acquired a dark color, but several of the features of a negro, by marrying and living with a black husband. A similar instance of a change in the color and features of a woman in Buck's county in Pennsylvania has been observed and from a similar cause. In both these cases, the women bore children by their black husbands.

It is no objection to the theory I have attempted to establish, that the negroes are as healthy, and long lived as the white people. Local diseases of the skin seldom affect the general health of the body, or the duration of human life. Dr. Theiry remarks that the itch, and even the leprosy, did not impair longevity in those people who lived near the sea-shore in the healthy climate of Galicia.*

The facts and principles which I have delivered, lead to the following reflections.

* Vol. II. p. 171.

1. That

1. That all the claims of superiority of the whites over the blacks, on account of their color, are founded alike in ignorance and inhumanity. If the color of the negroes be the effect of a disease, instead of inviting us to tyrannise over them, it should entitle them to a double portion of our humanity, for disease all over the world has always been the signal for immediate and universal compassion.

2. The facts and principles which have been delivered, should teach white people the necessity of keeping up that prejudice against such connections with them, as would tend to infect posterity with any portion of their disorder. This may be done upon the ground I have mentioned without offering violence to humanity, or calling in question the sameness of descent, or natural equality of mankind.

3. Is the color of the negroes a disease? Then let science and humanity combine their efforts, and endeavour to discover a remedy for it. Nature has lately unfurled a banner upon this subject. She has begun spontaneous cures of this disease in several black people in this country. In a certain Henry Moss who lately travelled through this city, and was exhibited as a show for money, the cure was nearly complete. The change from black to a natural white flesh color began about five years ago at the ends of his fingers, and has extended gradually over the greatest part of his body. The wool which formerly perforated the cuticle has been changed into hair. No change in the diet, drinks, dress, employments, or situation of this man had taken place previously to this change in his skin. But this fact does not militate against artificial attempts to dislodge the color in negroes, any more than the spontaneous cures of many other diseases militate against the use of medicine in the practice of physic. To direct our experiments upon this subject I shall throw out the following facts.

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1. In Henry Moss the color was first discharged from the skin in those places, on which there was most pressure from cloathing, and most attrition from labor, as on the trunk of his body, and on his fingers. The destruction of the black color was probably occasioned by the absorption of the coloring matter of the rete mucosum, or perhaps of the rete mucosum itself, for pressure and friction it is well known aid the absorbing action of the lymphatics in every part of the body. It is from the latter cause, that the palms of the hands of negro women who spend their lives at a washing tub, are generally as fair as the palms of the hands in labouring white people.

2. Depletion, whether by bleeding, purging, or abstinence has been often observed to lessen the black color in negroes. The effects of the above remedies in curing the common leprosy, satisfy me that they might be used with advantage in that state of leprosy which I conceive to exist in the skin of the negroes.

3. A similar change in the color of the negroes, though of a more temporary nature, has often been observed in them from the influence of fear.

4. Dr. Beddoes tells us that he has discharged the color in the black wool of a negro by infusing it in the oxygenated muriatic acid, and lessened it by the same means in the hand of a negro man. The land-cloud of Africa called by the Portuguese Ferrino Mr. Hawkins tells us has a peculiar action upon the negroes in changing the black color of their skins to a dusky grey.* Its action is accompanied, he says, with an itching and prickling sensation upon every part of the body which increases with the length of exposure to it so as to be almost intolerable. It is probably air of the carbonic kind, for it uniformly extinguishes fire.

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* P. 120. 121.

5. A citizen of Philadelphia upon whose veracity I have perfect reliance,* assured me that he had once seen the skin of one side of the cheek inclining to the chin, and of part of the hand in a negro boy, changed to a white color by the juice of unripe peaches (of which he ate a large quantity every year) falling, and resting frequently upon those parts of his body.

To encourage attempts to cure this disease of the skin in negroes, let us recollect that by succeeding in them, we shall produce a large portion of happiness in the world. We shall in the first place destroy one of the arguments in favor of enslaving the negroes, for their color has been supposed by the ignorant to mark them as objects of divine judgments, and by the learned to qualify them for labor in hot, and unwholesome climates.

Secondly, We shall add greatly to *their* happiness, for however well they appear to be satisfied with their color, there are many proofs of their preferring that of the white people.

Thirdly, We shall render the belief of the whole human race being descended from one pair, easy, and universal, and thereby not only add weight to the Christian revelation, but remove a material obstacle to the exercise of that universal benevolence which is inculcated by it.

June 17, 1797.

* Mr. Thomas Harrison.

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