

The Medical Justification of Discrimination

by Ann Myers

Our society is still familiar with the exercise of racial discrimination, even today. Why? Why should physical traits make a difference in the value or worth of an individual soul? An illuminating paper, "Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History" (2005) by Douglas Baynton, describes many of the bizarre medical pronouncements used to justify the debasing of people of color. He points out that historians and other scholars in the humanities have studied intensely, and often challenged the ostensibly rational explanations for inequalities based on identity—in particular, gender, race, and ethnicity. Disability, however, one of the most prevalent justifications, for inequality, has rarely been the subject of historical inquiry." A few examples are described here.

For years, treatment of people of color as sub-human was justified by the claim that they were mentally inferior to White people. The first formal explanation of this assumption was an article, published in the *New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal* 7, May 1851, by Samuel Adolphus Cartwright, a physician practicing in Mississippi and Louisiana in the antebellum period. Cartwright is best known for his description of a "mental illness" he called *Drapetomania*, a condition that caused slaves to run away. His medical degree from the University of Pennsylvania gave him credibility, as did the publication of his tract, *Diseases and Peculiarities of the Negro Race*. Cartwright states that the Bible calls for a slave to be submissive to his master, so the slave should have no desire to run away. He also uses the Bible to justify the immutability of the Negro's role, as declared by the Almighty, to be a "Submissive knee-bender." Furthermore, he asserts that "if his master or overseer be kind and gracious in his bearing towards him, without condescension, and at the same time ministers to his physical wants, and protects him from abuses, the Negro is spell-bound, and cannot run away." Cartwright prescribed both a remedy and a means of prevention for Drapetomania. He believed that with "proper medical advice, strictly followed, this troublesome practice that many Negroes have of running away can be almost entirely prevented." As a remedy for this "disease," he prescribed the removal of both big toes. If slaves were "sulky and dissatisfied without cause"—a warning

sign of imminent flight—Cartwright prescribed "whipping the devil out of them" as a "preventative measure".

Another justification for racial discrimination that appeared in Cartwright's article, was "Insufficient Intelligence." This alleged deficit was sometimes attributed to physical causes, explained as, "It is this defective hematosiis, or atmospherization of the blood, conjoined with a deficiency of cerebral matter in the cranium, and an excess of nervous matter distributed to the organs of sensation and assimilation, that is the true cause of that debasement of mind, which has rendered the people of Africa unable to take care of themselves."

Finally, there are also two different analyses of the effects of intermarriage. While the supposedly higher intelligence of "mulattos" compared to "pure" Blacks was offered as evidence for the superiority of Whites, those who argued against "miscegenation" claimed to the contrary, that the products of "race-mixing" were themselves less intelligent and less healthy than members of either race in "pure" form.

Of course, these theories are now debunked. Nevertheless, vague insinuations of the "God-given" inferiority of the intelligence and mental fitness of people of color is still used to justify discrimination and legitimize our White Supremacist society.

<https://courses.washington.edu/intro2ds/Readings/Baynton.pdf>