

## “Politics and Morality”

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Martin Newhouse

The relation between morality and politics is I think on many people’s minds these days, given the concerns about our divided national government and the almost daily reports of statements and decisions that seem routinely to provoke moral outrage (often stoked to a fever pitch by our 24/7 news reporting). But we should never forget that, as well on other types of issues, reasonable and well-meaning people can differ, and differ sharply, on what is moral and, consequently, on what is the morally right thing to do. And it is these moral conflicts that, I believe, can give rise to the greatest degree of anger, bitterness, and abusive language—and sometimes abusive conduct. I believe that we have all witnessed this sort of thing, and I will confess that I have myself had feelings of anger and bitterness against those who I believe have a morally wrong point of view on the burning issues of our own day, and who, because they have gained a political victory, attempt to enshrine those immoral views into regulations or laws.

And, in my view, there is this added danger when morality is injected into politics—as it must be with regard to certain important issues. That we, in our own mind, are on the side of the angels, as it were, may lead to a sense of virtuous superiority, may lead us not only to condemn, but to look down upon those of our fellow creatures who are on the “other side,” whatever that side may be and even label them as “evil” in our eyes.

However, I truly believe that, for the health of our democracy as well as for our own moral wellbeing, while we should never shy away from seeking to persuade those with whom we disagree on moral grounds to see things as we do—and, indeed, while we should seek through the political process to defeat them and achieve what we believe is right—we should also strive never to hate or demonize, or view as less than human, those who disagree with our views. And, that, while we are only human and therefore prone sometimes to anger at those who disagree, we should nevertheless always keep in mind and try to live up to the great challenge of the New Testament verses that I chose as our opening words, those quoted in Matthew ch. 7, v. 1- 5 that begin: “Judge not, that ye be not judged.”

And, in this connection, I believe that we can learn much from the words and deeds of Abraham Lincoln, in many ways our greatest President, who led our nation

through its greatest moral and political crisis. That was, of course, the crisis of African-American slavery, which was the root cause of the most destructive of all American conflicts, the Civil War. I believe that Lincoln's refusal, in the midst of an upheaval more intense and destructive than any other in our history, to see his enemies as "evil," and his moral understanding of how to bind up a nation that had been virtually torn asunder, has much to teach us with regard to the moral and political disagreements we face in our own time. Like those verses in Matthew, Abraham Lincoln's behavior in this regard is an ideal that I believe we should strive to emulate.

That Lincoln believed African-American slavery in the United States was immoral cannot be doubted. His letter to his friend Joshua Speed from which our chalice lighting reading was taken makes clear that already early in his life Lincoln had a visceral reaction against seeing his fellow human beings held in bondage: it is clear that he hated it. And, of course, Lincoln was not alone in hating slavery. We know that, from even before our nation's founding, many Americans, from both the South and the North, shared his hatred of slavery. Even a slaveholder like Jefferson, deplored it, as did many prominent Northerners, such as John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, and Margaret Fuller., to name a few.

What Lincoln added to his emotional and visceral reaction against slavery was a uniquely American moral basis for that reaction, a moral judgment that he derived from what he saw as foundational principle of this country, the statement in the Declaration of Independence that "All men are created equal." This is not to say that others before him had not seen the obvious contradiction between those words and the existence of African-American slavery in our country, but Lincoln succeeded where others had not in investing that contradiction with a power—a logical force—that it had not had before.

As we know, the United States Constitution was a document born of compromise. The chief goal of the Framers of that document was to create a unified nation that could preserve the republican form of government for which they and their contemporaries had fought. Reality, however, is always much more difficult than our ideas of it and, as the historian Gordon Wood has put it, when the Framers actually undertook the task of writing the Constitution, "it turned out that they did not control their society and culture as much as they thought they did."<sup>1</sup> And so they had to make compromises, including, most unfortunately, with regard to the issue of African-American slavery in this country, which, at that time the Constitution was written, existed in all of the former colonies, except in

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon S. Wood's *Revolutionary Characters* (New York, 2006), p. 26.

independent Vermont, where slavery had been abolished in 1777.<sup>2</sup> (I note that slavery was imposed on all of the American colonies by the British; and at least one British biographer of Lincoln, Lord Charnwood, author of a very fine biography published in 1916, expressly regretted this fact.)<sup>3</sup>

The Framers compromised on the issue of slavery even though—and the evidence for this is pretty strong—many of them, including some slaveholders among them, regarded the institution with revulsion and recognized, as Lincoln later would, that it was incompatible with the ideals for which the American Revolution had been fought. We should note that compromising on this issue, in essence taking slavery off the table as a matter of contention between the states, was easier because of the widespread belief at that time, both in the North and in the South, and shared by most of those drafting the Constitution, that slavery in this country was a dying institution. This, of course, turned out not to be correct and probably was not even correct at the time of the Constitutional Convention.<sup>4</sup>

With regard to slavery, the compromise Constitution that emerged from the Convention in Philadelphia was in some ways favorable to slavery and in other ways not. In the latter category is the fact that the Constitution permitted the slave trade to be abolished in 1808—which Congress promptly did.<sup>5</sup> And it is also a remarkable fact I think that neither the word “slave” nor the word “slavery”

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<sup>2</sup> Vermont only joined the country as the 14<sup>th</sup> State in 1791. Its entry as a state balanced the admission one year later of slave-holding Kentucky.

<sup>3</sup> By 1804 slavery had been abolished in all of the northern states: Pennsylvania (1780), New Hampshire and Massachusetts (1783), Connecticut and Rhode Island (1784), New York (1799), and New Jersey (1804). By 1804, before the creation of new states from the federal western territories, the number of slave and free states was 8 each.<sup>3</sup> “In popular usage, the geographic divide between the slave and free states was called the Mason-Dixon line (between Maryland and Pennsylvania or Delaware).

<sup>4</sup> Gordon S. Wood’s *Revolutionary Characters* (New York, 2006), pp. 26-28, has a good and pithy discussion of this point. “All the prominent leaders through that the liberal principles of the Revolution would eventually destroy the institution of slavery. When even such southerners like Jefferson, Patrick Henry, and Henry Laurens publicly deplored the injustice of slavery, from ‘that moment’ declared the New York physician and abolitionist E.H. Smith in 1798, ‘the slow, but certain death-wound was inflicted upon it.’ *Of course such predictions could have not been more wrong.* Far from being doomed, slavery in the United States in the 1790s was on the verge of its greatest expansion. Indeed, at the end of the revolutionary era there were more slaves in the nation than in 1760.” Of course, as Wood continues, “initially there was evidence that slavery was dying out. The northern states, where slavery was not inconsequential, were busy trying to eliminate the institution and, by 1804, all had done so. The founders thought the same thing might happen in the southern states. *Not only were there more antislave societies created in the South than in the North, but manumissions in the upper South grew rapidly in the years immediately following the end of the War for Independence.*” Wood concludes this discussion: “The reason the founders so readily took the issue of slavery off the table in the 1790s was this mistaken faith in the future.” (Italics my own.)

<sup>5</sup> It is true that the Constitution did not ban the importation of slaves from Africa. In Article I, Section 9, it stated that Congress could not ban the importation of slaves until 1808. Whether this was meant to favor the South, or was meant to give the South breathing room before the trade was banned, is debatable. Suffice it to say, that the Congress banned the importation of slaves by an act of 1807 that took effect in 1808. This perhaps gives a good indication of which side of that debate is probably correct. (It should also be noted that even earlier, in 1794, Congress prohibited an out-going slave-trade.)

appears anywhere in the entire document.<sup>6</sup> The absence of these words was definitely intentional.<sup>7</sup> Thus, where it is clear that the Constitution must be referring to a slave, what it says is: “Person held to Service of Labor.” (Article IV, Section 2.) And, in the famous “3/5ths” clause, which allowed the Southern states to include 3/5ths of their slave population for purposes of representation in the House of Representatives, the Constitution again does not use the word “slave,” but instead refers to Persons who are not free.<sup>8</sup> It is significant, in my view, that in these cases those in bondage are called “Persons,” the very same word used in the Constitution to describe those who were free.

It was based on these indications in the text of the Constitution, as well as on the actions of Congress immediately before and after (such as the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, i.e., before the Constitution was ratified, which prohibited slavery in the Northwest Territory) that Lincoln came to the firm belief that it was, in fact, the original intent of the Constitution’s Framers that slavery would gradually either be abolished or become extinct. And his great contemporary, the Abolitionist Leader Fredrick Douglass ultimately reached the same conclusion about the logic and tendency of the Constitution as originally adopted—that it was, in its essence, an anti-slavery document.<sup>9</sup>

Nonetheless, Lincoln based his moral position against slavery, not primarily on the Constitution, but on a document that, in his view, had encapsulated the spirit of the Revolution, the Declaration of Independence. Up to Lincoln’s time the Declaration had certainly been revered, but it was the Constitution that governed. Lincoln gave the Declaration a new force. As Gary Wills has put it: “Lincoln distinguished between the Declaration as the statement of a permanent ideal, and the Constitution as an early and provisional embodiment of that ideal, to be tested against it [and] kept in motion toward it.” And as one reads Lincoln’s

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<sup>6</sup> This despite the fact that African slavery in the colonies had existed from at least 1619.

<sup>7</sup> As Lincoln put it: “At the framing and adoption of the constitution, they forbore to so much as mention the word ‘slave’ or ‘slavery’ in the whole instrument. In the provisions for the recovery of fugitives, the slave is spoken of as a ‘person held to service or labor.’ In that [provision] prohibiting the abolition of the African slave trade for twenty years, that trade is spoken of as ‘The migration or importation of such persons as any of the states now existing, shall think proper to admit,’ etc. *These are the only provisions alluding to slavery. Thus the thing is hid away, in the constitution, just as an afflicted man hides away a wen or a cancer, which he dares no cut out at once, les bleed to death; with the promise, nevertheless, that the cutting may begin at the end of a given time.*” (Emphasis added.)

<sup>8</sup> Article 1, Section 2, Clause 3: “which shall be determined by adding to the whole Number of free Persons, including those bound to Service for a Term of Years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three fifths of all other Persons.”

<sup>9</sup> On this, see, e.g., Noelle Trent, *Frederick Douglass and the United States Constitution* at <https://www.aaihs.org/frederick-douglass-and-the-united-states-constitution/> (accessed on August 31, 2019).

letters and speeches before the Civil War, and the transcripts of his famous debates against Stephen Douglas in the Illinois contest for the United States Senate in 1858, one sees him returning again and again to those familiar ringing phrases of the Declaration of Independence:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Importantly, at the time that the word “men” was used in the Declaration, and when Lincoln used it, it generally meant humankind, including within it both sexes. (See, e.g., the King James version of Genesis, Chapter 1, Verse 27: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.”)<sup>10</sup> We know that Lincoln believed this because in his debates with Stephen Douglas he clearly indicated that the Declaration’s equality principle—which, by the way, did not necessarily imply a right to vote, although it did guarantee a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—applied to women as well as to men, who like all men—whether white or African-American—had “the right to eat the bread, without leave of anybody else, which [their] own hand “ has earned.

Again, it is to those self-evident truths of the Declaration that Lincoln returns again and again—challenging his listeners to see, as he did, that it was this country’s guiding ideal and principle. And against Douglas he argued that this principle was not something that could be voted up or down, this moral principle itself made civil liberty possible. Thus, when Douglas declared that he didn’t care whether a territory voted for slavery or against it, Lincoln responded:

“This *declared* indifference, but as I must think, covert *real* zeal for the spread of slavery, I cannot but hate. I hate it because of the monstrous injustice of slavery itself. I hate it because it deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world—enables enemies of free institutions, with plausibility, to taunt us as hypocrites—causes the real friends of freedom to doubt our sincerity, and especially because it forces so many really good men amongst ourselves into an open war with the very fundamental principles of civil liberty—criticizing the Declaration of Independence, and insisting that there is no right principle of action by *self-interest*.”

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<sup>10</sup> In making this point, I do not mean to imply that women *actually* had the same social or economic position or the same legal rights as men did during the Revolutionary or the Civil War period. They clearly did not. See, e.g., David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York, 1995), p. 59 (in Illinois in the 1830’s women, even if they owned property, had no independent right to pay taxes—husbands or guardians paid them).

By today's standards Lincoln—at least at the time of the Lincoln-Douglas debates—held many racist attitudes. Indeed, perhaps because of the political realities that he confronted, Lincoln went out of his way, in statements that will forever embarrass his modern supporters, to make it clear to the audiences both at the Lincoln-Douglas debates and in other venues that he did not believe in racial equality. He said that he thought that blacks would never be the political or civic equals of whites and that, as there had to be a racial hierarchy, as a member of the White race he was in favor of White supremacy. (I note that, in those debates and in some of his famous speeches from the late 1850s, he made these comments in response to Douglas's claims that Lincoln was an Abolitionist (he wasn't) and that Lincoln favored racial equality, racial mixing, and even marriage between the races.)

But while Lincoln's racism was and is objectionable, his opposition to slavery and his respect for black personhood placed him, both morally and, ultimately, politically, on a level far above Douglas and the mass of his contemporaries, both in the North and the South. To quote Lincoln's famous words from his last debate against Stephen Douglas at Alton, Illinois, on October 15, 1858:

“That is the real issue. That is the issue that will continue in this country when these poor tongues of Judge Douglas and myself shall be silent. It is the eternal struggle between those two principles—right and wrong—throughout the world. They are the two principles that have stood face to face from the beginning of time; and will ever continue to struggle. The one is the common right of humanity and the other the divine right of kings. It is the same principle in whatever shape it develops itself. It is the same spirit that says, ‘You work and toil and earn bread, and I’ll eat it.’ No matter in what shape it comes, whether from the mouth of a king who seeks to bestride the people of his own nation and live by the fruit of their labor, or from one race of men as an apology for enslaving another race, it is the same tyrannical principle.”

Returning to the point that I made at the beginning of this reflection, and to which I would especially call your attention to this morning, it has often been observed that one of Lincoln's truly outstanding characteristics was that, despite

the fierceness of opposition to slavery and his elevation of the issue to the moral plain, he did not demean or demonize those who disagreed with him on what we would today agree was (and is) a vital moral question. As one writer on Lincoln as put it:

“Lincoln was genuinely capable of inhabiting the Southern mind. He saw himself not as punishing the South but as delivering it from . . . its ‘Orwellian’ notion that ‘freedom is not possible without slavery.’”<sup>11</sup>

And this same writer, noting that Lincoln, unlike many of the enemies of slavery in his time “refused the easy comfort of locating evil exclusively outside of [himself],” quotes these words from Lincoln’s Annual Address to Congress:

“When it is remembered how unhesitatingly we all use cotton and sugar and share the profits of dealing in them, it may not be quite safe to say that the South has been more responsible than the North for [the] continuance [of slavery].”

And, consistent with these views, Lincoln, again unlike many of his contemporaries in the North, refused to see the South and the Southern people as inherently evil. Thus, for example, Lincoln began his speech on the Kansas-Nebraska Act at Peoria, Illinois, by stating:

“I wish . . . to say, that I do not propose to question the patriotism, or to assail the motives of any man, or class of men; but rather to strictly confine myself to the naked merits of the question.”

And later in the same speech, Lincoln made the following quite remarkable statement:

“Before proceeding, let me say I think I have no prejudice against the Southern people. *They are just what we would be in their situation.* If slavery did not now exist amongst them, they would not introduce it. If it did now exist amongst us, we should not instantly give it up. . . .When southern people tell us they are no more responsible for the origin of slavery, than we; I acknowledge the fact. . . . [Emphasis added.]

There is more from that speech that I could quote here, but I think that point I am making here is clear. Far from demonizing those of the slave-holding South as evil (leaving to one side that there may indeed be individuals who may be so), or

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<sup>11</sup> Introduction by Andrew Delbanco to *The Portable Abraham Lincoln*.

categorizing them as morally inferior or as “deplorable,” Lincoln lifted them to his own level as persons. Given the issues at stake—not just slavery, but the fate of the country itself, was this not remarkably generous?

Of course, the shining example of this characteristic of Lincoln’s is his Second Inaugural Address that was our First Reading this morning. There, as you heard, while he stated his inability to see the logic of the Southerners’ position on slavery, he refused to judge them. There also, rather than refer to Southern slavery, he referred to “American” slavery. And there he saw the Civil War as bloody and tragic price being paid *by the entire country* for “all the wealth piled by the bondman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil” and “every drop of blood drawn with the lash.”

I believe that John Burt (as quoted in our second reading) is correct that when Lincoln quoted Jesus’s command (as quoted by Matthew) to “judge not, that we be not judged,” Lincoln did not mean that one could not condemn the institution of slavery as evil—obviously Lincoln did so, and rightly. What Lincoln meant—and what, I believe, those famous Biblical verses mean, is that (to quote Burt) “nobody has a right to imagine that they are morally pure relative to their enemies.” To quote Burt again, “‘Judge not,’ then, does not mean that because one’s hands are dirty one must adopt a position of moral neutrality. It only means that one cannot point out the mote in one’s brother’s eye without also reckoning with the beam in one’s own.”

Is it too much to ask that we try to apply this remarkable attitude of Lincoln’s to our feelings and reactions to those who oppose our moral positions today? Would it not be better to follow Lincoln’s example in our own lives and try to think like this today—and would that not be better for ourselves and for our country? These are questions that my study of Lincoln has caused me to pose to myself, and which I hope we can discuss among ourselves this morning.