

Abraham Lincoln's political thoughts of principle and necessity



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Crucial to understanding Abraham Lincoln's political thought is the relationship between principle and necessity. Lincoln applies his thoughts on the relationship between these two concepts throughout his public career, particularly in confronting the debate over slavery and the crisis of the American Civil War. Lincoln's 1858 *Speech at Chicago, Illinois* provides a concise summary of his overall view:

"It may be argued that there are certain conditions that make necessities and impose them upon us, and to the extent that a necessity is imposed upon a man, he must submit to it. I think that was the condition in which we found ourselves when we established this government. We had slavery among us, we could not get our constitution unless we permitted [the south] to remain in slavery, we could not secure the good we did if we grasped for more, and having by necessity submitted to that much, it does not destroy the principle that is the charter of liberties. Let that charter stand as our standard" (*Chicago*, 21).

Lincoln's statement posits a mixture principle and compromise, raising paradoxical conclusions that might strike the modern reader as strange and unnerving. Lincoln is known as the stoic hero committed to principle—how could be Honest Abe be willing to bend to necessity? Lincoln must provide compelling answers to hard questions to vindicate himself. What is the role of necessity in the active life, and in what way does it impact that form of life's claim to being a good way to live? Does the active life betray principles by bending to necessities? If so, is it a good life?

Principle and Necessity

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For Lincoln, resolving the tension between principle and necessity requires examining what goods people should strive for and what people should begrudgingly tolerate in pursuit of those goals. Consider his position on slavery. Lincoln is fervidly opposed to slavery in principle, as evident when he states, “ I have always hated slavery, I think as much as any Abolitionist” (*Chicago* , 10). However, he was also well aware that despite his moral repulsion, slavery still existed in America by necessity. In principle, Lincoln desired to lead a nation free of slavery, yet by necessity, at the start of his presidency, he could not. The institution existed before Lincoln’s time, and did not cease, whether he wishes that it had or not. Consequently, the tragedy must be dealt with practically.

Commitment to A Creed

While Lincoln recognized his inability to escape or ignore political necessities, his pragmatic statesmanship did not cast all principle aside. Lincoln holds that people should not be indifferent to moral principles; rather, they should strive to manifest them in the concrete world. Over the course of his debates with Senator Stephen Douglas, Lincoln articulates the difference between the Republican Party’s position on slavery and the Democratic Party’s position; while Lincoln holds that slavery is a moral wrong, his opponents do not. “ I suggest that the difference of opinion, reduced to its lowest terms, is no [*sic*] other than the difference between the men who think slavery is a wrong and those who do not think it wrong” (*Sixth Debate* , 254). However, moral wrongs should be “ voted down” (*Sixth Debate* , 257). “ Any man can say that who does not see anything wrong in slavery, but no man can logically say it who does see a wrong in it; because no man can logically say he don’t

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care whether a wrong is voted up or down" (*Seventh Debate* , 315). People who are logical make decisions based on what is right; thus, Lincoln holds that citizens and lawmakers should make political and legal decisions informed by what is good and true. Political decisions cannot be void of moral concern, but must rather strive for principles out of a commitment to the truth.

Lincoln's political thought demonstrates the sentiment that America's creed, which is represented in its founding documents, is grounded in a particular articulation of human nature and aspires towards a vision of the individual and collective good. In his *Gettysburg Address* , Lincoln articulates America's chief guiding principle: " the proposition that all men are created equal" (*Gettysburg* , 18). Slavery thus contradicts the sentiments of both the Constitution and the Declaration—the spirit of America itself. Lincoln's words echo Jefferson's when he pens, " 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" (*Peoria* , 266). The United States stands as a republic devoted to the principle that all men are created equal—it must be preserved. Though America perpetuated slavery, its bedrock was the principle of equality; commitment to the latter required a pragmatic treatment of the former.

The Union Forever

As Lincoln understood, the only way for the Union to end slavery and live up to its principles was for it to paradoxically temporarily allow the extension of

slavery. Lincoln states in his Peoria Address, " Much as I hate slavery, I would consent to the extension of it rather than see the Union dissolved, just as I would consent to any GREAT evil, to avoid a GREATER one. But when I go to Union saving, I must believe, at least, that the means I employ has some adaptation to the end" (*Peoria* , 270). Here again, Lincoln aptly underscores the relationship between principle and necessity. Since America's ideals are defined by commitment to a creed that espouses freedom and equality, it is reasonable to conclude that the creed which binds people together must be sustained. By implication, people who hope to fight for America's values must be committed to preserving the creed even if it means employing unsavory adaptations to do so. This commitment could even entail allowing a grave injustice to continue so that a greater good may eventually occur.

Wartime Powers

Lincoln's constitutional interpretation of wartime powers of the president also echo his sentiments on accepting necessary evils in pursuit of good principles. Lincoln suspended the writ of habeas corpus and detained men who could cause problems for the Union's war effort. In defense of this action, he cited the Constitution, which he argued actually *allows* for such measures when necessary, so long as the evils are done away with when the crisis is over (*Erastus* , 5). In his *Letter to Erastus Corning and Others* , Lincoln pens, "... the provision of the constitution that ' The privilege of the writ of habeas corpus shall not be suspended, unless when in cases of Rebellion or Invasion, the public safety may require it' is *the* provision which specially applies to our present case" (*Erastus* , 5). Lincoln publicly argued the necessity of preserving the Union justly permitted the suspension of an <https://assignbuster.com/abraham-lincolns-political-thoughts-of-principle-and-necessity/>

otherwise good privilege and principle. He took no pleasure in allowing acts that would otherwise be unjust. Even so, he was willing to permit such actions to occur in order to prevent greater evils from happening.

In making provisions for its own survival, the Constitution anticipates the necessity of violating principles in certain circumstances. The Constitution itself reflects the demands of necessity in light of principle. Lincoln does not view his actions as abusing the spirit of the Constitution; rather, he defends his wartime actions as an extension of its provision. He views the Constitution as a document that makes provisions for its survival. “

Perpetuity is implied, if not expressed, in the fundamental law of all national governments” (*First Inaugural* , 2). After all, the constitution was written by men who realized that providing for domestic tranquility and promoting the general welfare meant realizing the tragic necessity to bend to immoral circumstances in pursuit of a greater good (*Peoria* , 275). That said, it must be emphasized that whatever lesser evils might be accepted in the present, the greater good must also be capable of doing away with them as well. The suspension of habeas corpus would be rescinded after the war, along with any other wartime measures. The Union is opposed to slavery, and must do away with it—but it must have the tools for preservation in order to maintain its principles.

The Nature of the Soul

Lincoln’s description of the human soul itself reflects the perpetual struggle between principle and necessity: while humans can be very selfish by nature, they can also feel a commitment to freedom and equality. Their souls

in conflict with themselves—and with others —keep humans in a constant state of tension. In his 1858 *Seventh Debate with Stephen Douglas* , Lincoln deliberates, “ The Bible says somewhere that we are desperately selfish. I think we have discovered that fact without the Bible.” (*Seventh Debate* , 310). Later, in his 1860 *Cooper Union Address* , Lincoln further articulates the position of slavery in relation to his conception human nature: “ Human action can be modified to some extent, but human nature cannot be changed. There is a judgement and a feeling against slavery in this nation, which cast at least a million and a half of votes. You cannot destroy that judgement and feeling-that sentiment-by breaking up the political organization which rallies around it” (*Cooper Union* , 16). The struggle between freedom and bondage, liberty and tyranny, lies both in the soul and in society.

Lincoln’s profound description of human nature not only explains the origins of political institutions; it also articulates the goal of the active life. Political institutions reflect the dual nature of the soul: both the just, freedom loving part and the tyrannical, enslaving part. A virtuous statesman must at once seek the good and promote the aspirations for justice that lie in mens’ hearts while recognizing that these same hearts are tempted toward tyranny and enslavement. But doing this successfully requires working *within* the already existing institutions, both good and bad. Lincoln’s Peoria Address enunciates this clearly: “ Slavery is founded in the selfishness of man’s nature—opposition to it, is his love of justice. These principles are in eternal antagonism...Repeal the Missouri compromise...repeal the declaration of independence—repeal all past history, you still cannot repeal human nature”

(*Peoria* , 271). Both slavery and freedom exist side by side; tyrannic souls and just souls live together. Certain parts of human nature are immovable, so utopian visions are folly. To work for justice and freedom, one must deal with the existing institutions by working not only around them, but *within* them.

Conception of History

The history of the founding reflects the same tension within each human soul. Organic in its nature, Lincoln's formulation of American history develops across a number of works. Of pivotal significance to the overarching system though is his description of the origins of slavery in relation to America's founding. England brought slavery to the New World, where it flourished in the southern colonies. Yet, the other colonies allowed it to persist and continue (*Peoria* , 249-250). Following their independence from England, the revolutionary generation " possess[ed] themselves ... of this goodly land; and uprear[ed]...a political edifice of liberty and equal rights" (*Lyceum* , 108). Liberty and equality its bedrock, America's free republic was founded on the principles of justice and freedom. Despite this foundation, once they achieved their independence, the colonies found themselves confronted with a tragic reality: slavery was already instituted. The spirit of America, characterized by a commitment to freedom and equality, tasks people to bring about just propositions-just principles-to its inhabitants.

Contrast with Radicals

The radical abolitionist views of William Lloyd Garrison provide a striking contrast between people who are driven by principle but tolerate necessity, and people who will not admit necessity under any circumstances. Like Lincoln, Garrison approves of the Declaration. However, he does not elevate the Constitution—what he deems an impure, shameful, and invalid document—to a sacred level. (*On the Constitution* , 1). Garrison instead argues that the provisions for necessity in the Constitution contradicts the principles in the Declaration. In direct contrast to Lincoln, Garrison denounces providing for necessity altogether, stating instead, “[the constitution] was a compact formed ... for the sake of achieving a political object—an unblushing and monstrous coalition to do evil that good might come” (*On the Constitution* , 1). He continues, “ it was not valid then-it is not valid now” (*On the Constitution* , 1). For Garrison, any government that makes provisions for ‘ necessity,’ however reluctantly or begrudgingly, is not committed to principle at all (*On the Constitution* , 1).

Garrison’s views on the Union illuminate the contrast between Garrison’s political thought and Lincoln’s. Unlike Lincoln, Garrison holds that governments should be based on principle alone; a government that carries imperfect baggage is not worthy of existing (*Disunion* , 1-2). A Union that permits any slavery at all, *even where it already exists* , “ is to be resisted, denounced, and repudiated by every lover of liberty, until its utter overthrow shall be consummated ... there should be one united shout of *No Union with Slaveholders* ! Down with such a Union” (*Disunion* , 1-2). Indeed, even a stated commitment to aspire to ending slavery is not enough for Garrison (*The American Union* , 2). He vehemently proclaims that “ the doctrine, that

the end sanctifies the means, is the maxim of profligates and imposters, of usurpers and tyrants" (*The American Union* , 2). Ultimately, Garrison zealously demands the immediate expression of principle, with no regard for necessity. By contrast, Lincoln holds that necessity makes the execution of principle (or justice) a generational project, which much unfold over time as necessities fall away.

The problem with Garrison's position is that it is rooted in a false understanding of human nature. The universal immorality of slavery notwithstanding, it was still brought into the world and sustained by unjust people. Garrison's utopian solution to the matter also poses problems. For one, Garrison is naive. He is too lofty and too idyllic. It is not always certain that good will triumph over evil. Indeed, fighting for good necessarily entails *accepting* evil. Worse still, Garrison's ardent ideas do not appear to allow for mercy and understanding for those who wrongly embrace practices and institutions that oppose principle. Lincoln had the solution to these problems; however, it may be helpful to examine an account of one who judged Lincoln's legacy to understand the path forward.

Comparison With Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass' *Oration in Memory of Abraham Lincoln* underscores Lincoln's tragic acceptance of necessary evils in pursuit of righteous principles from a third party perspective. Douglass articulates Lincoln's position in America's history succinctly. He judges Lincoln as a man committed to principle, but willing to tolerate tragic necessity in order to achieve justice (*Oration* , 6). Douglass surmises that an accurate judgement

of the world requires a broad, comprehensive view of circumstances, as opposed to a naive consideration of isolated facts (*Oration* , 6). “ Despite the mist and haze that surrounded him, despite the tumult ... and confusion of the hour, we were able to take a comprehensive view of Abraham Lincoln, and to make reasonable allowance for the circumstances of his position. We saw him, measured him ... not by stray utterances ... not by isolated facts torn from their connection ... but by a broad survey, in the light of the stern logic of great events” (*Oration* , 6).

Douglass underscores the notion that accurate judgement requires a holistic understanding of the world; goals, principles, and ideals must be sought for with realist knowledge of the world we live in. At various points, he reproves particular actions that Lincoln took. Douglass acknowledges that Lincoln appeared to take too long to emancipate the slaves. Indeed, he also thought it “ strange” that Lincoln accused them of being the cause of the war.

Moreover, Lincoln’s consideration of sending the slaves away from the land they were born in (by shipping them back to Africa) grieved Douglass. Yet Douglass’ list of grievances does not end there; Lincoln also initially refused to have blacks in the Union army, and did not persecute people who tortured and murdered captured blacks. He also refused to oust an army commander who “ was more zealous in his efforts to protect slavery than to suppress rebellion,” and he also revoked the Proclamation of Emancipation of General Fremont (*Oration* , 6). Despite these actions, Douglass still admits that had [Lincoln] put the abolition of slavery before the salvation of the Union, he would have inevitably driven from him a powerful class of the American people and rendered resistance to rebellion impossible (*Oration* , 11). By

implication, had Lincoln not taken unsavory actions, his efforts would have been “vain and fruitless” (*Oration*, 11). Though Douglass does not ultimately excuse Lincoln for everything, he does conclude that the good outweighed the bad.

Douglass’ “comprehensive view” of Lincoln allows us to see—not fully, but at least more clearly—the true character of this President. Douglass described Lincoln’s “great mission” as being: “first, to save his country from dismemberment and ruin; and, second, to free his country from the great crime of slavery.” Douglass understood that in order to accomplish this twofold task, Lincoln would need the support of his fellow-countrymen. Thus, his words and deeds required an unparalleled amount of prudence and calculation, even if it made him seem cold and indifferent to the plight of slaves. As Douglass explains, “Had he put the abolition of slavery before the salvation of the Union, he would have inevitably driven from him a powerful class of the American people and rendered resistance to rebellion impossible.” With the luxury of time, Douglass affirmed that Lincoln’s actions were, indeed, sensible and necessary. Douglass’ perspective, in the end, provides us with a fuller picture: Viewed from the genuine abolition ground, Mr. Lincoln seemed tardy, cold, dull, and indifferent; but measuring him by the sentiment of his country, a sentiment he was bound as a statesman to consult, he was swift, zealous, radical, and determined. In the end, this “comprehensive view,” allowed Douglass to call Lincoln “our friend and liberator.”

Melancholy

Lincoln's political ideas on the virtues of statesmanship appear to come at a cost though; a tragic sense of despair seems to permeate throughout his political deliberations. The wisdom that is required for a virtuous life in politics is rooted in the realization that immense suffering and tragedy will always exist in the world. Indeed, a statesman will have to directly confront- and even occasionally *embrace* -terrible suffering, and horrendous tragedy. Lincoln himself carried this burden as a number of his letters and writings illustrate. His 1841 letter to John T. Stuart expresses the toll that the tragedy in his life took on him. Lincoln opens the letter with, " I proceed to answer [you] as well as I can, tho' from the deplorable state of my mind at this time" (*Stuart* , 229). The letter closes on a pessimistic note: " I am now the most miserable man living. If what I feel were equally distributed to the whole human family, there would not be one cheerful face on earth. Whether I shall ever be better I can not tell; I awfully forbode I shall not. To remain as I am is impossible; I must die or be better, it appears to me" (*Stuart* , 229). This letter raises a question: what role does depression, or melancholy, play when the active life is confronted by necessity?

Empathy As A Driving Force

Lincoln's perpetual struggle with depression, though unknown to the public during his tenure in office, is now well noted among scholars.

Melancholy in a statesman can provide a stronger incentive to act on behalf of people who suffer injustice and affliction. The difference between sympathy and empathy is important here. The former is the feeling of pity for those who suffer; the latter is the ability to *understand* and share in the

suffering. Sympathy can move people to act charitably, give graciously, and serve vigorously. Empathy can fuel to a fiery passion to help others. When weak souls endure suffering, they may desire to inflict the same pain on others. When virtuous people are confronted with hardship, they turn the other direction, seeking to *alleviate* the suffering of others, rather than striving to inflict pain on others. A typical virtuous statesman works for the public good. However, a virtuous statesman who understands what people may suffer and endure if he or she does not promote goodness in the world has *double* incentive to fight for justice.

Lincoln exemplifies a virtuous statesman driven not just by ambition, but empathy. An example of this can be seen in his *Letter to Fanny McCullough*. Writing to a young girl who is grieving because of her father's death, Lincoln offers not just condolences, but compassionate wisdom. He explains to her that "perfect relief is not possible, except with time. You can not now realize that you will ever be better. Is not this so? And yet it is a mistake. You are sure to be happy again ... I have had experience enough to know what I say; and you need only to believe it, to feel better at once. The memory of your dear Father, instead of an agony, will yet be a sad sweet feeling in your heart, of a purer and holier sort than you have known before" (*Fanny*, 17). Lincoln's steadfast empathy is also evident in the way he ends the letter. He closes by stating, "Please present my kind regards to your afflicted mother. Your sincere friend, A. Lincoln" (*Fanny*, 17). Through empathy, Lincoln is able to approach people humbly. Instead of acknowledging his status as President, he deems himself a *sincere friend* (*Fanny*, 17).

The empathy that melancholy can create in virtuous statesman also provide incentives for mercy that radicals like William Lloyd Garrison seem to lack. Lincoln understands that justice must be administered; however, undue affliction is inherently unjust. Garrison staunchly condemns the slaveholders in the South. Lincoln also condemns their actions, but offers a different solution for how to deal with slaveholders. He deliberates on just treatment and proper conduct for rebels in his 1865 *Second Inaugural Address* . Regarding the actions of the south, he states, “ let us judge not that we be not judged.” Following this, Lincoln posits the proper way to handle the rebels following a union victory in the war. He continues,“ With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve a just and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations” (Second Inaugural, 333). For Lincoln, *no one* deserves to experience undue suffering. Having felt suffering himself, Lincoln desires to alleviate excessive pain even among those who inflicted it to others.

Conclusion

Lincoln shows that necessity is what gives shape to the active life. The contemplative life is sustained by the need for thoughtful consideration. So long as there is more to learn, contemplation will be sustained. Likewise, the religious life on earth is sustained by virtue of being alive; as long as one is conscious of a divine presence, there is always time for prayer and meditation of the divine. The active life exists so long as there are principles

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to fight for, and tragedies to overcome. There is no need for an active life in a perfect world, for all moral goods have already been achieved, there is no need to take active steps to acquire them. Thus, the active life is *perpetuated* by tragedy and necessity. Indeed, an active life of virtue must therefore be aware of or accept the fact of tragedy. As long as the world is imperfect, there will be a need to bring justice to it.

However, despite the potential tragic demands placed on it by necessity, the active life can still be characterized as virtuous and admirable. Suffering inevitably comes to all in the world we inhabit. Yet, it is through suffering that we derive empathy. The ability to not only understand others' pain, but feel it with them, is indicative of a virtuous character. A life driven by a zealous desire to alleviate the suffering of others is nothing less than virtuous—it may even be *the most* virtuous way of life. Fighting to bring right principle to people amidst tragic necessity is arguably more indicative of genuine care than simply knowing what a virtuous life looks like. A virtuous way of life requires more than merely contemplation—it requires *action*. Lincoln's political thought exemplifies an active life guided by proper principle. Armed with the wisdom to know what is right, coupled with the cunning to achieve justice for society, Abraham Lincoln stands as a moral exemplar that people should not only study, but strive to emulate in their actions, sentiments, and values.

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I might make this a little more artful, perhaps noting the strange mixture of principle and compromise, how this might strike the modern reader the wrong way, then from there extrapolating some practical advice