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Teaching Caselettes

LINCOLN AND THOREAU

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Abraham Lincoln and Henry David Thoreau were both morally opposed to slavery, but expressed their opposition in different ways. Lincoln advocated gradual reform and argued that citizens must enforce the Fugitive Slave Act, so long as it is the law of the land. Thoreau, on the other hand, believed that slavery must be resisted, even if resistance would lead to war and the destruction of the Union. An overview of the “Understanding Hypocrisy and Integrity” framework accompanies this case study.

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Abraham Lincoln and Henry David Thoreau were both morally opposed to slavery. However, they responded very differently to the Fugitive Slave Act, which required the governments of non-slaveholding states to return runaway slaves to their owners.

Thoreau responded by continuing to help runaway slaves obtain their freedom and refusing to pay taxes to the state of Massachusetts, which was compliant with the Fugitive Slave Act. In paying taxes to a government that enforces the Fugitive Slave Act, Thoreau argued, citizens become morally responsible for slavery. Consequently, only through civil disobedience can citizens remain free from the stain of slavery.

Thoreau recognized that civil disobedience might have adverse consequences: Individuals risk imprisonment, financial ruin, and ridicule, and widespread resistance to the Fugitive Slave Act might lead to civil war. However, Thoreau considered compromising over slavery in order to avoid adverse consequences selfish and cowardly. Furthermore, he argued that if civil disobedience leads to war, the blame does not lie with those who refuse to allow themselves to become agents of injustice. The blame instead lies with slave owners and their appeasers who have attempted to force innocent American citizens to assist them in oppressing innocent people.¹

Lincoln, on the other hand, believed that citizens have an obligation to obey existing laws, even if they find them morally objectionable. Lincoln himself promised to enforce the Fugitive Slave Act during his first inaugural address. The idea that citizens can choose to disobey particular laws, Lincoln explained, undermines the sanctity of all laws. If abolitionists claim the right to disobey laws that they dislike, then other groups are likely to claim a similar right. In particular, lynch mobs might claim that they have a right to hang African Americans who have been accused of crimes without a proper trial.²

In addition to promising to uphold the Act, Lincoln discouraged abolitionists from seeking to have it repealed. The Fugitive Slave Act, he argued, was a compromise necessary to preserve the peace and stability of the Union. Its repeal would cause the South to secede, an event which would make the eventual abolition of slavery even more difficult. If the southern states succeeded in obtaining independence, Lincoln warned, they would be able to reinstate the slave trade and make treaties with Canada that would require the extradition of runaway slaves who had crossed the Canadian border.³

¹ Henry David Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience," in *Walden and Other Writings*, ed. Joseph Wood Krutch (New York: Bantam Books, 1989).

² Abraham Lincoln, "Address to the Young Men's Lyceum," in *The Portable Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Andrew Delbanc (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 19-23.

³ Lincoln, "First Inaugural Address," in *Portable Abraham Lincoln*, 195-204. Lincoln, "Speech on the Kansas-Nebraska Act at Peoria, Illinois," in *Portable Abraham Lincoln*, 72-3.

Understanding Hypocrisy and Integrity

Often ethical action is depicted as a continuum, with cynicism on one end, moral fanaticism on the other and integrity as the perfect mean. The problem with viewing ethical action as a continuum, Ruth Grant explains, is that it obscures the fact that there are multiple forms of integrity and hypocrisy. Grant is Professor of Political Science and Philosophy and Senior Fellow in the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University.

She identifies two different forms of integrity: the integrity of the moderate and the integrity of the moralist. The moderate focuses upon the consequences of her actions and is willing to “be a little bad” in order to ensure a just outcome. The moralist, on the other hand, evaluates actions by the motivations that guide them and is inclined to obey her conscience, regardless of the consequences.

The moralist is unwilling to compromise her principles because she associates integrity with purity. Purity, she believes, is achieved by ensuring that her motives are not tainted by self-interest and her actions are not corrupted by compromise. The moderate finds this struggle for purity unproductive. Moral actors are unlikely to achieve complete purity of motivation, the moderate argues, as humans are complicated and conflicted creatures. While she believes that individuals should strive to ensure that selfish motivations do not prevent them from pursuing just outcomes, the moderate emphasizes that an obsession with the purity of one’s motives and deeds can hinder the pursuit of such outcomes.

Just as there are different kinds of integrity, there are different kinds of hypocrisy. The most obvious is the cynical hypocrite, who deliberately uses the pretence of virtue to obtain selfish and ignoble ends. However, most hypocrites are not consciously aware of their hypocrisy, and both moderates and moralists may be self-deceiving hypocrites. The moderate engages in hypocrisy by telling herself that she is compromising for the greater good, when she is really pursuing her own interests. Or, she is simply complacent, failing to recognize injustice rather than disturb her own comfortable position. The moralist engages in hypocrisy when she tells herself that she is standing on principle, despite when her actions are motivated less by the justness of the principle and more by a desire to feel and appear morally superior.

	<i>Moderation</i>	<i>Moralism</i>
<i>Integrity</i>	<i>Statesman</i>	<i>Moralist</i>
<i>Hypocrisy</i>	<i>Complacent Hypocrite</i>	<i>Righteous Hypocrite</i>

Moralists and moderates have difficulty understanding each other, because each believes that their form of integrity is the only form of integrity. As a result, each sees only hypocrisy in the other. Whereas the moderate believes that all moralists are self-righteous hypocrites willing to sacrifice a just outcome for selfish reasons, the moralist regards the moderate’s willingness to compromise as a lack of conviction. Perhaps moralists and moderates would understand each other better if they recognized that there are multiple forms of hypocrisy and integrity.

See Ruth Grant, Hypocrisy and Integrity: Machiavelli, Rousseau and the Ethics of Politics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pages 62-8 and 171-2