



THE KENAN  
INSTITUTE FOR ETHICS  
at Duke University

*Teaching Caselettes*

## Teaching Notes

# 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 these teaching notes.

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*(Note: Please refer to the “Understanding Hypocrisy and Integrity” overview at the end of these teaching notes to familiarize yourself with the general ethical framework these cases were created to illustrate.)*

Issues: This case helps participants understand the moralist/moderate paradigm and encourages them to examine their own moral intuitions. Ideally, participants will be able to identify their own approach to ethical dilemmas and gain insight into the benefits and dangers of their approach. Because Thoreau and Lincoln both make compelling arguments, participants may also gain some appreciation for alternative approaches.

1. *Who do you think was right and why?*

In answering this question, participants should be encouraged to take a side and explain why they agree with Lincoln or with Thoreau. It might be useful to ask participants whether their position on this debate is representative of their approach to ethical action. If they side with Thoreau, it is because they tend to be moralists, who value principled action and do not want to be tainted by compromise? If they side with Lincoln, is it because they tend to be more concerned with ensuring a good outcome and more accepting of compromises?

Some participants might resist the notion that Lincoln is compromising his beliefs, arguing that he is instead trying to balance conflicting principles, namely his desire to preserve the Union and his desire to end slavery. Those participants should be encouraged to consider whether Lincoln’s desire to preserve a Union that he recognizes as flawed is consistent with the moderate perspective, which resists the quest for perfection. Thoreau, who is clearly a moralist on this issue, is less concerned with preserving the Union because he considers it to be corrupted and thus not worth saving.

2. *If Lincoln had taken more radical views, he probably would not have been elected president. Does the fact that Lincoln personally benefited from compromising his beliefs affect your evaluation of his actions?*

This question helps participants identify their own moral intuitions. Are they concerned with the motivations behind Lincoln’s behavior or are they concerned with its consequences? How flexible are they with respect to motivations? Do they believe that individuals should not be motivated by self-interest, or do they take a more nuanced approach, arguing that it is acceptable for individuals to look out for their own interests, as long as they are not solely concerned with personal gain and they use their success to help others?

The discussion leader might use this as an opportunity to discuss why moralists believe that pure motivations are important.

While moderates are less concerned with motives than with outcomes, moralists will insist that purity of motivation is what makes an action ethical. Furthermore, the moralist will worry that individuals who fail to pay attention to their motives are more likely to become complacent hypocrites. Without considering their underlying intent, actors can end up accepting short-term costs by anticipating long-term gains, and in doing so, deceive themselves about their intent and about the nature of the supposed long-term gain. By trying to ensure that one’s motives are pure, individuals have a better chance of avoiding hypocrisy.

3. *Is there something self-absorbed about Thoreau's desire to maintain moral purity regardless of the consequences?*

This question touches upon one important objection to the moralist perspective. Moderates, in particular, often accuse moralists of being self-absorbed and of putting their own desire for a clean conscience above the well-being of others. The discussion leader can ask participants whether they think that Thoreau puts his own desire for a clean conscience above the well-being of his society, but it might also be useful to consider whether they think that this is a problem with moralists in general. The discussion leader can also ask participants to consider how moralists might respond to this objection, and whether they find that response compelling. (One possible response is that those who do not care about maintaining a clean conscience are likely to become complacent and thus incapable of securing just outcomes. Another response is that the desire for a clean conscience is a sign of integrity, as opposed to selfishness).

4. *Do you think that both sides have integrity? Can you disagree with someone and still recognize that they have integrity?*

The discussion leader should make sure that participants understand Grant's distinction between moralists and moderates, as well as her explanation of why moderates and moralists tend to see only hypocrisy in the other.

The discussion leader should ask participants whether they find it difficult to recognize both Lincoln and Thoreau as having integrity for the reasons that Grant discusses. In other words, do participants identify Lincoln as a moderate and Thoreau as a moralist and consequently have difficulty recognizing integrity in ethical perspectives that are different from their own?

Do participants think it is good that there is a mix of moderates and moralists in the world, or would it be better if everybody were one or the other? Some might argue that a society of moralists would be best, as it would be less complacent. Others might prefer a society of moderates, arguing that just outcomes would be easier to secure if everybody were willing to compromise. Finally, some might argue that both are necessary (participants who have this perspective also tend to be primarily concerned with achieving good outcomes). Moderates are desirable because they are usually better at ensuring good outcomes. However, moralists are also useful because they inspire moderates to avoid complacency. Moreover, sometimes moralists will achieve just outcomes that the more cautious moderates did not realize were possible. For example, radical abolitionists were not taken seriously by most of the contemporaries and yet their vision was eventually achieved, in part through their own activities.

5. *Max Weber wrote, "Every one of us who is not spiritually dead must realize the possibility of finding himself at some time in the position of saying here I stand; I can do no other."<sup>1</sup>*
- a. *Do you agree with Weber?*
- b. *Are there dangers to being unwilling to compromise? Are there dangers to being too willing?*

Many participants will be unwilling to label themselves as either complete moralists or complete moderates, and this question encourages them to consider whether some middle ground is possible. Essentially, Weber argues

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<sup>1</sup> Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber*, ed. H.H Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 127.

that while a willingness to compromise is desirable, those who have moral convictions must have some lines that they will not cross. Participants, particularly those who consider themselves to be moderates, should discuss whether they agree with Weber. Participants might also discuss how this line can be identified.

**Conclusion:** The discussion leader can wrap up by summarizing the discussion and by emphasizing that there are pluses and minuses to both the moderate and moralist perspective. For example, moralists have a tendency to sacrifice just outcomes because they refuse to compromise their principles, and moderates have a tendency to become complacent, failing to recognize or respond to injustice. Moderates also run the risk of unconscious hypocrisy, convincing themselves that they are compromising for the greater good, when they are really pursuing their own interests. These problems might be avoided by greater awareness of the spectrum of ethical actions and the dangers of particular approaches to ethics.

## 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*