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# Morality and slavery

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'Morality and slavery' argues that, as much as detachment and dispassion govern standard historical practice, historians cannot escape making moral judgments. Precisely because slavery is a morally charged subject, its history has been especially prone to changing points of view, traceable, for example, in recent histories of the slave trade and the controversy over Olaudah Equiano's birthplace. Various polar extremes – the structural coerciveness of slavery versus the agency of slaves; the persistence of African ethnicities versus rapid creolization; the spread of slavery versus the rapid growth of anti-slavery in the early republic – are evident in historical interpretations, which necessarily involve complicated value judgments and serious moral ramifications. The essay concludes by suggesting that a measure of balance and fairness has been possible in the study of slavery. Through empathy, historians have been able to recover, in part at least, the hopes and fears, dreams and nightmares, notions of right and wrong among both slaves and masters in previous epochs.

Most historians are reluctant to make moral judgments. The typical watchwords that govern standard historical practice are: detachment, tolerance, and dispassion. Peter Novick summarizes this 'objectivist creed' as follows: 'The objective historian's role is that of a neutral, or disinterested judge; it must never degenerate into that of advocate or, even worse, propagandist'. Since moral standards change from one epoch to the next, the wise historian empathizes rather than absolves or condemns. To be avoided are overt expressions of denunciation or approbation. History is not a moral tale, nor should the discipline become, in David Hackett Fischer's phrase, 'a handmaid of moral philosophy'. Should historians succumb to this ignoble aim, they would be committing the 'moralistic fallacy'. Thus, historians are enjoined to refrain from moralizing; their toolkits must eschew sanctimonious pieties and moral indoctrination. According to David Knowles, somewhat contra Novick, the historian 'is not a judge, still less a hanging judge'. The task of history is not to adjudicate the crimes of the past, but to understand and make sense of them.

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At the same time, most historians probably accept that they should not excuse past crimes. It is unnecessary to remain impartial when discussing, for example, Hitler, Stalin, the Holocaust, oriental despotism or slavery. Furthermore, a historian's political and moral commitments undeniably generate real power in historical study, whereas the dispassionate approach often leads to passionless, complacent, and bland history. An aroused E. P. Thompson trying to rescue the working class from the condescension of posterity or an ardent Samuel Eliot Morison championing the Puritans were both able to produce stirring histories – precisely because of their moral engagement with their subjects. Some historians might feel uncomfortable about being mobilized in defense of particular standards and ideals, but many would probably acknowledge a commitment to certain bedrock humane principles. For E. H. Carr, however, being vaguely committed to certain values does not penetrate to the heart of the matter, for, in his view, 'historical interpretations always involve moral judgments'. Inescapably, ineluctably, he argued, historians engage in value judgments all the time. In trying to assess people's purposes and motives, historians necessarily employ a measure of moral evaluation. Historians' choice of subject, selection of information, narrative strategy, even vocabulary, expose their viewpoints. Value judgments inevitably suffuse their work.[1]

Indeed, the study of slavery, precisely because it is a morally charged subject, exhibits the powerful influence of changing value judgments in an especially direct way. Sympathy with abolitionist sentiments in the mid-nineteenth century, for example, led W. E. H. Lecky to describe England's moral crusade against slavery as 'among the three or four perfectly virtuous pages in the history of nations'. By contrast, in early twentieth-century America, when racism was rampant, Ulrich B. Phillips wrote books on American slavery that were firmly grounded in his belief in black inferiority. His research was deep and wide-ranging, but the slaves' character, in his account, included 'an eagerness for … music and merriment' and 'a courteous acceptance of subordination'. His treatment of the 'peculiar institution' was an extension of antebellum pro-slavery arguments. After the Second World War, when anti-racism flowered, the premise of Kenneth Stampp's study of slavery was the mirror opposite of Phillips': slaves were 'merely ordinary human beings', innately only 'white men with black skins'. As Stanley Elkins shrewdly noted, Stampp's work, like Gunnar Myrdal's contemporary sociology from which it borrowed, or the writings of his abolitionist predecessors with whom he identified, 'crackled with moral electricity'.[2]

Moral judgments have continued to permeate the historical scholarship of slavery. Essentially, the pendulum has oscillated back and forth between two extremes. One tendency, labeled the 'damage' model, stresses the oppression of blacks and the brutality of the institution. It emphasizes the victimization and

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degradation of slaves. Yet, if slaves were so brutally treated, it would seem they had little chance to make a life for themselves; they appear to lack dignity and self-respect. The opposite scholarly pole can be termed 'contributionist' history, which valorizes the achievements of slaves, despite the hardships they faced. Collective strength rather than individual weakness takes the spotlight; black culture and community garner much of the attention; and the tendency is to prioritize the autonomy of black life, the robustness of the black family, the resilience of black institutions, and the degree of black resistance. The general line is that blacks heroically triumphed over adversity. Yet the problem with this approach, as Novick has noted, is that it creates 'Teflon slaves, all but immune to the system which oppressed them'. Scholarly attempts to strike a balance between the structural coerciveness of slavery and the agency of slaves necessarily involve value judgments. Where to apply the weight is the fundamental question? How does one square a portrayal of slavery as an extreme example of domination with a description of slaves as successfully asserting their humanity? The basic dilemma is that too much emphasis on oppression makes African-Americans into mere victims, while too much stress on their creativity obscures the brutality of the system. One extreme robs slaves of human subjectivity; the other diminishes the horror of slavery.[3]

A similar dilemma pervades the recent efflorescence of work exploring the influence of African ethnicities in the New World. Nobody denies that slaves brought with them African values and principles, and almost everybody accepts that African newcomers faced extraordinary losses when subjected to the Middle Passage, but where to place the emphasis – the persistence of African ethnicities or rapid creolization – seems to owe much to ideological and political persuasions. Two rough-and-ready schools of opinion can be identified: an Africa-centric stress on continuities versus an America-centric emphasis on creativity. One sees slaves as forming identifiable communities based on their ethnic or national pasts, tenaciously holding onto homeland memories and values. The other sees slaves adapting to survive, ruthlessly jettisoning what was no longer applicable, embracing their new environments. This divide can be attributed in part to scholarly specialization – whether the training was as an Africanist or as an Americanist – but also to identity politics. Finding a usable past – whether it is rooted in African continuity or American creativity – energizes the debate.[4]

Moral judgments are particularly evident in studies of the slave trade. It is extremely difficult to deal with a subject that evoked no moral protest for thousands of years, and then suddenly in the eighteenth century became the main target of moral opprobrium. Robert Harms navigates between modern and early modern perceptions in his impressive account of the voyage of the French slave ship *Diligent* in the years 1731–1732, based on the extant journal of First Lieutenant Robert Durand. 'Although shocking to twenty-first-century bourgeois

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culture', Harms notes, 'the story [Durand's journal] tells was distressingly ordinary in its own time and place'. He constantly probes how Durand could 'outline such an evil mission in such impersonal prose'. He is surprised that Durand apparently felt no shame at his own involvement or compassion for the enslaved. At one point, Harms observes, 'True to his profession as a merchant and a seaman, Robert Durand was far more interested in recording the prices, values, and profits of his trading activities than in the human tragedy that he was directing'. Of course, the point might be that Durand had no notion that he was enmeshed in a human tragedy. Similarly, Harms later notes, 'Curiously, Durand mentioned the African captives only twice during the entire sixty-six days of the middle passage, and then only to record deaths'. But again is this omission 'curious' in the kind of journal Durand kept and at the time he wrote? Furthermore, asking whether Durand was 'in denial' may well be the wrong question to pose.

Another recent micro-history of the slave trade, *The Two Princes of Calabar* by Randy Sparks, centres on the story of two members of a ruling family, themselves slave traders, who were ambushed and captured by English slavers, taken to the New World as slaves, before finally reaching England where they successfully sued for their freedom. Eventually, they returned to Old Calabar, where they resumed slave trading. After their own experiences of the horrors of the slave trade, such callousness 'may be shocking to modern sensibilities', notes Sparks, and he feels it necessary to explain it by referring to the ubiquity of slavery and a prevailing African system of ethics. Their suit for freedom argued only that they had been illegally enslaved, not that enslavement itself was illegal. The book ends, not by dwelling on the return to slave trading, but rather by celebrating the two princes' escape from slavery, their freeing of themselves, and their return to their homeland. Modern value judgments have shaped both stories.[5]

They also underlie the recent controversy over Olaudah Equiano's birthplace. Equiano was, in Vincent Carretta's words, 'one of the most accomplished English-speaking writers of his age and unquestionably the most accomplished author of African descent'. His 'Interesting Narrative' is the foundational text of the genre now known as slave narratives; it is 'one of the great survivor's tales of his or any other time', as Adam Hochschild puts it. Equiano's account of his African upbringing and his personal experience of the Middle Passage – in part because of the rarity value – have proved iconic, because he gives voice to the millions of people who suffered enslavement and the slave trade. Imagine, then, the bombshell when a literary critic discovered that Equiano's baptismal record and a naval muster roll gave his birthplace as South Carolina. Seemingly, Equiano invented rather than reclaimed an African identity. If this new information is true, does it 'invalidate' Equiano? The shrillness of some rebuttals suggests that it does. Thus, one African scholar asserts that Equiano must have been an Igbo because of 'his assertive character and business acumen'. Another notable African

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historian has claimed that Equiano's birthplace is 'the most important thing … the authenticity of everything he says about kidnapping and the Middle Passage' depends on his African origins. The alternative response is to suggest that Equiano's literary creativity has been enhanced by the revelation. In the eighteenth century, demarcations between fiction and non-fiction, between the autobiography (a term not even invented at the time) and the novel were far more fluid and porous than today. Such a context may help explain Equiano's imaginative reconstructions – if that is what they were. Furthermore, he must also have listened with extraordinary sympathy and understanding to those who experienced the trauma of the Middle Passage. As much as anything else, moral judgments appear to be driving these differing evaluations.[6]

One last area in which value judgments are especially notable is in recent works on the Founders of the American Republic and slavery. To explain why most Founders did not free their slaves is, seemingly, to excuse them. It is as if one is exonerating the evil of slavery. *Tout comprendre, tout pardoner*. The alternative extreme is to engage in Founder-bashing. That eloquent advocate for liberty, Thomas Jefferson, comes in for particular abuse: he has been described as a friend to despotism, a blatant hypocrite, a racist, a rapist, even a monster. Gary Wills has argued that Jefferson won the presidential election of 1800 only because of the clause in the Constitution providing that each slave would count for three fifths of a person in determining the congressional representation of each state. He has detailed his role as the protector and extender of the slave system. At issue in many of these debates is an assessment of the foundational character of the early republic. Was the spread of slavery central to the new nation, or was anti-slavery more fundamental? Should the American revolutionaries be credited with putting slavery on the road to extinction or should they be criticized for maintaining and perpetuating the institution? Moral judgments lie at the heart of the debate.[7]

While scholarship on slavery seems to twist in the wind, buffeted by contemporary concerns, too much should not be made of polarities and extremes. On many issues, some measure of balanced detachment and fairness has been possible. The best students of slavery have been able to penetrate, in part at least, the alien world of masters and slaves. The historians' greatest moral obligation – to enter sympathetically into a milieu different from their own, bring it to life, and make sense of it – has often been achieved. Generally speaking, history can be distinguished from fiction, scholarship from polemic, good history from bad. James Kloppenberg's cautionary yet optimistic clarion call can be readily endorsed: it is possible to 'make our versions of the past truer because they are more comprehensive, more multidimensional, more frankly tentative in tone, and more sensitive to the diversities of human cultures than our predecessors' accounts have been'. The study of slavery also reveals that truth.[8]

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