The Abolitionist Archetype: Andrew Delbanco and the Ethics of Political Protest

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THE ABOLITIONIST ARCHETYPE: ANDREW DELBANCO AND THE ETHICS OF POLITICAL PROTEST

In 2011, Columbia University scholar Andrew Delbanco published an essay titled “The Abolitionist Imagination.” In his article, Delbanco thoughtfully questions the abolition movement’s political approaches to eradicating slavery. Although Delbanco believes that their anti-slavery stance was morally right, their forms of political action often adopted irresponsible and fanatical philosophies that may prove politically dangerous. By examining the abolition movement’s intellectual history, Delbanco dissects today’s scholarly preference toward the abolitionists and deconstructs the heroic role contemporary society has assigned them. His essay has inspired a passionate discourse on the topic, as literary scholars and historians like John Stauffer, Manisha Sinha, Darryl Pinckney, and Wilfred M. McClay have directly responded to this question of the abolitionist’s political role in American history. In 2012, “The Abolitionist Imagination” was published as a book that included these critical commentaries.

Delbanco envisions the abolitionists’ form of politics extending across a much larger timeline than the American antebellum era; he observes their political character as a trend that spans the entirety of modern Western — especially American — history. His parallels range from literary figures (e.g., Hamlet, Don Quixote, Doestoevsky’s Kirilov) to pro-life advocates, civil rights figures, and prohibition supporters.1 He even draws a connection between abolitionists’ rhetoric and American governmental policies (e.g., “the wars on poverty, on cancer, on drugs, the ongoing war on terror, and... the war on abortion”).2 In Delbanco’s

2 Ibid., 48.
understanding, the abolitionist’s spirit is neither a cultural nor a political anomaly but rather a notable example from a common perspective within the contemporary political milieu. Because of this, Delbanco adopts the term “abolitionist” to refer to this political trend as a whole, labeling it an archetype that transcends the historical events in which they appear.

Delbanco largely focuses his analysis on their distinctive political approaches to ethical and political issues. For him, the common traits that characterize both the abolitionists and their political counterparts are: 1) a belief in higher law (which society often contradicts), 2) a heavy focus on personal morality, and 3) a failure to properly assess their political actions’ potential consequences. While none of these traits appeal to Delbanco’s own political philosophy, his essay mainly critiques the abolitionist’s dismissal of consequences from their ethical perspective and the potentially counterproductive nature of this failure. The two former qualities — although both with their own separate problems — facilitate the third by discouraging healthy societal checks that could curb the archetype’s radical philosophies and promote a more effective, responsible political approach.

Higher law is the concept that a principle (or a set of principles) takes precedence over political laws and social norms. Driven by a desire to set right a corrupt system, Delbanco’s archetypal abolitionist views himself as a morally righteous political actor who goes against the government’s immoral laws or institutions to advocate a “higher-law standard.” Delbanco describes the abolitionist archetype as “someone who identifies a heinous evil and wants to eradicate it—not tomorrow, not next year, but now.” The targeted evil often flourishes within society’s culture, and is either tolerated or accepted by most of its members. For the historical

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3 Ibid.
4 Ibid., 23.
abolitionist, the evil in question is slavery — a practice widely enforced by legislative statutes and cultural norms. Delbanco also mentions Hamlet’s mission within this context, discussing how he was “born to set right” the rotten state of Denmark’s “time… out of joint.” The world surrounding the abolitionist is distorted beyond reason, functioning outside of what is just. Because of the abolitionist’s loyalty to higher law, he may dismiss the government’s legitimacy in one way or another. In this sense, society’s opposition to his views neither affects him nor discourages his pursuit of morality. He believes his own “individual conscience[’s]... dissent” from societal decorum may lead the public to better pursue higher law. Delbanco asserts that higher law is deeply imbedded within American political culture, complicating the ways in which the American may objectively analyze this abolitionist archetype.

The abolitionist may stress that this higher set of laws is either designated by God (i.e. divine law) or by nature (i.e. natural law). Although both views appear within the abolition movement, the concept of divine law often plays a more prominent role within the historical abolitionists’ rhetoric due the country’s firm Christian bearings during the period. With this divine law, the abolitionist subscribes to a belief that society’s injustice or immorality specifically goes against God’s teachings. The interpreted severity of God’s judgment varies among the abolitionists, as some may consistently subscribe to nonviolence while others encourage it when challenging a system that is particularly cruel. For the historical abolitionist, this argument often emphasizes God’s disapproval of slavery’s injustice and that those who promote slavery are unChristian.

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5 Ibid.
6 Ibid., 48.
The abolitionist’s obsession with personal morality builds upon this conception of higher law and its opposition to society. As the abolitionist’s understanding of higher law derives from his own conscience and his distrust of others, he tends to separate his own moral life from the world he wishes to reform. His end goal may aim to save society in some way. However, because of his emphasis upon morality and the constant opposition between the self and society, he may not recognize his own role or duties within his community. Because of this, he may prioritize his own moral purity above achieving his goal. Delbanco highlights this in his critique of abolitionists’ rejection of Lincoln — the politician hailed to have executed their goal of emancipation.\(^7\) As Garrison argued that “no true abolitionist should participate in electoral politics,” the archetypal abolitionist concern seems to focus less on challenging institutions’ corruption mechanisms and more on preventing the moral individual from dirtying his hands within the system.\(^8\) In this sense, the core of the abolitionist’s political drive may actually lead him away from effectively pursuing the justice to which he aspires.

Delbanco thereby identifies what he interprets as a dangerous flaw within the abolitionist mindset: their lack of consequentialist calculation. He argues that because the abolitionist prioritizes moral means and his own individual morality, he does not properly value his actions’ outcomes. They are consistently “backing away and [experiencing] a repulsion from the anticipated consequences of what such views in operation might lead to.”\(^9\) These failures run deeper than Garrison’s mere rejection of electoral politics; Delbanco also cites John Brown’s violent raid at Harpers Ferry.\(^10\) While Brown pursued abolition, his actions not only caused

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\(^7\) Ibid., 15.  
\(^8\) Ibid., 8.  
\(^9\) Ibid., 35.  
\(^10\) Ibid., 16.
excessive violence during the incident; they also incited heated reactions from pro-slavery citizens. Brown’s aversion to assessing consequences demonstrates the same problem Delbanco identifies in his literary examples. Kirilov commits suicide in an attempt to usher a new millennium, but fails to incite change and only causes his dependents harm. Hamlet eliminates the sources of corruption within his court, but leads almost every major character to their death in the process. In both fictional and historical examples, the abolitionist’s ability to affect the system through his radical means often fails to promote the conscientious change he desires.

Delbanco’s argument warns that this lack of consequentialist morality can lead to excessive violence, a neglect of personal obligation (e.g., family), and/or a dehumanization of political opponents. His biggest fear, however, is that this abolitionist approach may not only fail to create positive change but may actually reverse any systemic progress already occurring. The abolitionist largely works outside of organized government, making his positive influence upon the system indirect, if not entirely negligible. However, if his actions appear too radical or harmful, they could easily lead to reactionary responses from both the public and the government. While the abolitionist’s positive change is limited, his action’s negative effects could be catastrophic.

Instead of supporting the abolitionist archetype’s morality-driven politics, Delbanco promotes the more moderate politics of Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Melville denounces slavery as a “sin… a blot, foul as the crater-pool of hell.”\textsuperscript{11} Both he and Hawthorne signed petitions opposing the Fugitive Slave Law, even when Melville’s father-in-law — a

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 30.
Massachusetts chief justice — defended it. However, both remained hesitant in adopting the methods used by the abolitionists, especially in terms of the abolitionists’ absolutist and uncompromising rhetoric. Through their awareness of the abolitionists’ weaknesses, both Melville and Hawthorne provide a cautious political approach when addressing abolition. In this sense, their views may provide a better political style, one to which we should aspire. Their skepticism for both society’s values and the individual’s tendency toward narcissistic heroism may lead to more productive and less disruptive reform politics.

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Whether intentionally or unintentionally, Delbanco’s conception and critique of the abolitionist archetype reflects the political philosopher Max Weber’s theory of political ethics. Wilfred M. McClay implies this point in his response to Delbanco, noting how the abolitionist “master concept” embodies Weber’s ethics of ultimate ends. Delbanco himself refers to Weber’s influence on our own understanding of the abolitionists, specifically within the “Foner synthesis” — Eric Foner’s portrayal of the abolitionist as a “passionate idealist” who opened the public’s eyes to slavery’s “moral imperative.” Foner measures the abolitionists through Weber’s political criteria, especially in terms of their ability to enact effective politics. While partially disagreeing with Foner’s conclusions about abolitionism, Delbanco evokes similar Weberian measurements through his focus on a consequentialist morality.

12 Ibid., 29.
14 Delbanco, 21.
15 Ibid., 22.
In “Politics as a Vocation,” Weber defines two forms of political ethics that are “fundamentally differing and irreconcilably opposed” — an “ethic of ultimate ends” and an “ethic of responsibility.”\textsuperscript{16} The ethic of ultimate ends expresses the maxim of “good intent” — political action that seeks change through morally pure routes.\textsuperscript{17} For the pursuer of ultimate ends, who acts with good intentions yet produces bad results, “not he but the world, or the stupidity of other men, or God's will who made them thus, is responsible for the evil.”\textsuperscript{18} The ethic of responsibility inverts the former ethic’s principles, valuing good results over morally pure means. The practitioner of an ethic of responsibility, in this sense, pursues a form of consequentialist morality. This political actor may neglect the importance of his method — and maybe even the means’ secondary outcomes — in order to achieve a positive result.\textsuperscript{19} Weber advocates a balance between these two ethics, which he theorizes may produce a close-to-ideal approach to political action. For Weber’s political ideal, then, both morality and consequences are principles needed to produce humane yet effective political results.

As McClay suggests, Delbanco implicitly frames the abolitionist as the archetype for Weber’s ethic of ultimate ends because the abolitionist almost completely neglect his actions’ consequences. On the spectrum’s other end, the professional politician that entirely shirks abolition’s ethical argument overemphasizes the ethic of responsibility. Delbanco may identify Abraham Lincoln and the Republican Party as the proper balance between the two ethics. However, his essay’s heavy, positive focus on Hawthorne and Melville suggests that he also believes they balance the two ethics well.

\textsuperscript{16} Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” American University, last modified March 2nd, 2010, accessed April 5th, 2016, 23. \url{http://fs2.american.edu/dfagel/www/Class%20Readings/Weber/PoliticsAsAVocation.pdf}
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
Delbanco’s application of Weberian ethics presents a reasonable framework for assessing a protester’s political action, as the activist should find a balance between consequentialist and principled morality. However, he does not examine the actual historical abolitionists enough to acknowledge how the abolition movement fails to meet these ethics. He mainly discusses William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, and John Brown in his argument — a small sample that does not accurately reflect the movement’s diversity in approaches. He omits Henry Highland Garnet, David Walker, and other abolitionist figures who do challenge some of the archetypal weaknesses he observes in the group. His focus upon Brown also neglects the fact that most other abolitionists disapproved of Brown’s radical and violent methods. Furthermore, while he agrees with much of Douglass’ later political philosophy, he does not examine Douglass as the hero he champions Hawthorne to be. In this sense, Delbanco’s argument lacks the nuanced analysis of historical abolitionists it needs to properly ground his argument.

This essay attempts to qualify Delbanco’s original assertion by examining different abolitionist factions through his archetypal lens. In what follows, I will discuss the Transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, William Lloyd Garrison and his band of followers, black militant abolitionists like Henry Highland Garnet and David Walker, and Frederick Douglass. This paper will also analyze Delbanco’s favored political actor Nathaniel Hawthorne and his relationship to the abolitionist movement. While many of these figures do fall victim to the archetypal characteristics he discusses, their relationships to the traits he identifies vary widely. Even when these figures do mirror Delbanco’s archetypal abolitionist, their actions’ effects are often less potentially catastrophic than he imagines. As we look more closely at Delbanco’s portrayal of the abolitionists, the reader may not only acquire a stronger
sense of which qualities ultimately weaken protest politics, but also observe how successful and ethical political action are found in these historical examples. Through this, the contemporary reader may gain the hope that protest politics can produce positive results when using self-awareness.

THE TRANSCENDENTALIST’S ULTIMATE ENDS: THOREAU AND EMERSON

The Transcendentalists Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) and Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) both lived and participated within the abolitionist culture of Concord, MA, a town heavily involved in the cause. Thoreau’s mother Cynthia, as well as his sisters Sophia and Helen, were all exemplary participants in the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society. Emerson’s aunt Mary Moody Emerson, second wife Lidian, and abolitionist friends also participated in this group. Surrounded by loved ones leading the local abolitionist charge, the two Transcendentalists found themselves within the heart of the movement’s culture. While neither actively advocated for any of the movement’s organizations, both strongly criticized slavery’s practices and housed escaped slaves as they moved along the Underground Railroad. Thoreau even spoke during the 1854 Framingham Fourth of July anti-slavery rally at which Garrison burned the American Constitution on stage.

Although they remained more on the movement’s fringes, Thoreau and Emerson are important for analyzing Delbanco’s concerns with abolitionists because: 1) they embody an

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20 Concord had a particularly strong show of female abolitionists, which makes its abolitionist history even more interesting. Sandra Harbert Petrullionis, “‘Swelling that great tide of humanity’: The Conord, Massachusetts, Female Anti-Slavery Society,” The New England Quarterly vol. 74, no. 3 (Sep. 2001): 386-387.
21 Ibid., 394.
influential cultural phenomenon occurring within an overlapping milieu, and 2) they represent
the historical antithesis to Delbanco’s heroes Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville, who
are often labelled as Anti-Transcendentalists. While the Transcendentalists made less notable
impact upon the abolition movement than activists like Garrison, American historians have
occasionally championed the two thinkers as influences, “allies[,] and foils” to most American
leftist ideological movements. While this perspective may exaggerate their effect on historical
events, the portrayal places them in ideological agreement with many of the contemporary
groups Delbanco thinks of as representing the archetypal abolitionist’s mindset. Their differences
from Delbanco’s beloved Hawthorne and Melville further accentuate their relevance to the
archetype in question. In contrast to the Anti-Transcendentalists’ recognition of human nature’s
inclination toward immorality and irrationality, the Transcendentalists argue that society
encourages the individual to stray from their natural sense of morality and reason. While this
contrast may not necessarily solidify the Transcendentalists as the epitome of Delbanco’s
abolitionist archetype, Hawthorne’s criticism of the Transcendentalists’ political views strongly
mirrors Delbanco’s critique of the archetypal abolitionist. In this sense, both at least
superficially represent the historical and archetypal roles of the abolitionist. With both their
abstract similarities and historical connections to Delbanco’s abolitionist, Thoreau and Emerson
may have the most potential to perfectly reflect Delbanco’s concerns — even more so than
Garrison.

The Transcendentalist political theory centers around the idea that an individual can
understand natural law through introspection rather than the study of society’s laws. For both

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23 Charles Capper, “‘A Little Beyond’: The Problem of the Transcendentalist Movement in American
Emerson and Thoreau, the Constitution’s principles were arbitrary in relation to true moral values. In his 1841 essay “Self-Reliance,” Emerson writes:

Trust thyself… Society is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs. Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist. He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness.24

Emerson theorizes that society encourages its citizens to pursue conformity rather than true goodness as a virtue. Instead, he believes the individual must assess goodness based upon his own observations instead of through society’s opinion. By arguing that goodness — a moral quality he associates with God throughout the essay — exists outside of society’s decorum, Emerson locates the concept of goodness within higher law. Like Thoreau, he also speaks of society as an inhibition to goodness, while “self-reliance” is the catalyst to propel the individual toward true virtue. The individual has a stronger sense of morality than any community, so external criticisms are more likely to discourage the individual’s righteous actions rather than produce a valid moral check upon his pursuits.

In fact, when discussing the Fugitive Slave Law in his 1851 speech, “An Address at Concord,” Emerson explicitly discusses higher law and how many actors in the political system wrongly dismiss the concept. He expresses “dismay at hearing that Higher Law was reckoned a good joke in the courts,” which may allude to his recent frustration with his Congressman Daniel Webster “mak[ing] a gibe out of [New York Congressman] Seward’s appeal to a higher law than

the Constitution.”

Emerson denounces this repudiation, exclaiming that “every nation and every man bows, in spite of himself, to a higher mental and moral existence.” The emphasis on the Constitution’s values especially betrays these higher principles with the Fugitive Slave Law’s recent enactment. Emerson asks: “And what is the use of constitutions, if all the guaranties provided by the jealousy of ages for the protection of liberty are made of no effect, when a bad act of Congress finds a willing commissioner?” While he recognizes that the Constitution may express some moral protections for liberty, its current implementation — especially with Congress’ ratification of the Fugitive Slave Law — compromises the document’s ability to appeal to a higher law.

Thoreau similarly champions a form of higher law over politics, often addressing the latter with disdain. In his essay “Civil Disobedience,” Thoreau characterizes service to the state as antagonistic to moral pursuits:

...most legislators, politicians, lawyers, ministers, and office-holders... serve the state chiefly with their heads; and, as they rarely make any moral distinctions, they are as likely to serve the devil, without intending it, as God. A very few- as heroes, patriots, martyrs, reformers in the great sense, and men- serve the state with their consciences also, and so necessarily resist it for the most part; and they are commonly treated as enemies by it.”

By suggesting that those working through the government “serve the devil… as God,” Thoreau asserts that their conception of law not only fails to pursue the true moral code implied in his reference to God; he also insinuates that the government’s laws often oppose moral

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27 Ibid.

understanding and may lead the individual to commit evil instead of doing good. In contrast, Thoreau sees those who “resist” the state’s law by following their “consciences” as rightly pursuing this form of higher law.

Thoreau applies this same moral rhetoric to slavery and the Constitution. In his “Slavery in Massachusetts” speech, Thoreau denounces the American public’s intense adherence to the Constitution’s word as law. While discussing the Fugitive Slave Law, Thoreau argues:

The question is, not whether you or your grandfather, seventy years ago, did not enter into an agreement to serve the Devil, and that service is not accordingly now due; but whether you will now, for once and at last, serve God — in spite of your own past recreancy, or that of your ancestor — by obeying that eternal and only just CONSTITUTION, which He, and not any Jefferson or Adams, has written in your being.

His vehemently anti-slavery argument insists that the individual’s sense of morality should stem from his own “being” rather than from the society or political world that frames him. His language often places morality and politics at constant odds, suggesting that, in most cases, morality and politics are mutually exclusive.

Because of their lack of faith in government’s laws, both Thoreau and Emerson often prioritize the individual’s pursuit of morality over any argument for communal progress. During the 1830s and 1840s, Emerson even seemed moderate by the standards of his anti-slavery New England town because of this. In the 1841 essay “Self-Reliance,” Emerson suggests that the Northerner should focus more on personal concerns than on the abolition movement:

If an angry bigot assumes this bountiful cause of Abolition, and comes to me with his last news from Barbadoes, why should I not say to him, 'Go love thy infant; love thy wood-chopper: be good-natured and modest: have that grace; and never varnish your hard, uncharitable ambition with this incredible tenderness for black folk a thousand miles off. Thy love afar is spite at home.'

30 Emerson, “Self-Reliance.”
Here, he actively discourages the Northern abolitionist from participating in the cause because he believes this moral quest may become a vice. As the Northern abolitionist becomes more obsessed with strangers’ lives, he may care more about these strangers (who he can barely affect) than his loved ones, who he may positively impact every day. As Emerson sees “love” as more productive “at home,” he observes a painful irony in the abolitionist’s sympathy for others only known through abstractions. In focusing his energy on these faraway political events, the abolitionist may actually neglect the proper care he could give to his personal obligations. This stance echoes some of Delbanco’s arguments against the abolitionist archetype, as Emerson highlights the abolitionist’s failure to recognize his own personal responsibilities as a result his moral preoccupation. Delbanco’s skepticism especially emerges in Emerson’s ideas about efficacy and the individual’s ability to impact these corrupted events.

However, Emerson’s lack of concern with abolition here may also reflect his self-centered perspective on the political issue. Emerson did not become notably fervent about abolition until the 1850’s Fugitive Slave Law legally obliged Northern citizens to return escaped slaves to their masters. After this law was enacted, he gave multiple lectures about the issue and began participating in the Underground Railroad.\(^{31}\) As he did not publicly discuss this issue much before his own state became involved, he did not strongly express the abolitionist’s passion until the law required him to directly participate in the morally corrupt system. Although Emerson consistently abhorred slavery’s immorality, his relationship to public engagement may center more around his preoccupation with himself instead of the abolitionist’s actual cause.\(^{32}\)

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\(^{31}\) Siebert, 463.

\(^{32}\) I think it is also important to note that some historians place Emerson as converting to the abolitionist cause and recognizing African Americans as equal to whites in 1844. While this discussion focuses more on his change in approach and does not contradict this understanding, it is an important factor in understanding Emerson’s
Thoreau’s abolitionist politics showcase an even worse obsession with the self’s morality than Emerson’s does. Thoreau’s discussion of slavery and abolitionism almost always emphasizes abolitionists’ virtues instead of abolition itself. In “A Plea for Captain John Brown”, Thoreau unabashedly waxes lyrical about John Brown’s character, painting him as a Christ-like figure when most abolitionists hesitated to fully back Brown’s violent and reckless actions. Throughout the essay, Thoreau stresses Brown’s strengths: “He was a man of Spartan habits… a man of rare common sense and directness of speech… a man of ideas and principles… greatly superior numbers quailed before him… because they lacked a cause — a kind of armor which he and his party never lacked.”

Similar to his presentation of Brown here, Thoreau barely mentions slavery in his whole plea and instead lauds Brown’s masculinity and idealism. Thoreau frames abolition as Brown’s admirable “cause,” which presents the issue of slavery as secondary to Brown’s life story. Earlier in his career, Thoreau praised other notable figures inside and outside the abolition movement through a similar lens, including Wendell Phillips and Thomas Carlyle. This same emphasis even appears in the earlier-quoted section of “Civil Disobedience,” which portrays those who resist government in terms such as “heroes, patriots, martyrs, reformers in the great sense.” As Thoreau seems preoccupied with how the abolitionist’s resistance reflects a strong masculine character, his commitment to the cause appears less grounded in the actual problems at hand than in his desire to praise what he sees as heroic ideals in contemporary men.


34 Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience,” 205.
His own political action reflects this same focus on the individual instead of the cause, because he often emphasizes an antagonistic relationship with society’s corrupt systems more than inciting actual change. In “Civil Disobedience,” Thoreau outlines his political hopes for revolution:

> Cast your whole vote, not a strip of paper merely, but your whole influence... If the alternative is to keep all just men in prison, or give up war and slavery, the State will not hesitate which to choose... If the tax-gatherer, or any other public officer, asks me, as one has done, "But what shall I do?" my answer is, "If you really wish to do anything, resign your office." When the subject has refused allegiance, and the officer has resigned his office, then the revolution is accomplished. But even suppose blood should flow. Is there not a sort of blood shed when the conscience is wounded? Through this wound a man's real manhood and immortality flow out, and he bleeds to an everlasting death.\(^{35}\)

Because of the system’s corruption, Thoreau refuses to vote or endorse a political party. He instead suggests that the protesting individual not only remove himself from the country’s political system, but also from its tax system. Through this protest, he theorizes that the individual may force the government to act, especially if he may gather enough other morally-conscious citizens to withdraw with him. Although Thoreau may believe this method effective, it appears unrealistic at best. He promotes change by encouraging officeholders to resign their posts rather than create legislation. He stresses destruction over revision and constructive change, which reflects his anti-government ideal but fails to successfully address the issue at hand. During his discussion of revolution, he even evokes the same heroic rhetoric we previously discussed when he highlights the individual’s “real manhood,” “immorality,” and “an everlasting death.” For Thoreau, the individual’s attempts to work apart from and against society reflect his commendable moral character. The individual’s admirable traits, however, do not necessarily include any productive interactions with society that may right the ethical problem.

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 213-214.
Also, while Thoreau does occasionally mention African American slaves’ suffering in this essay and in “Slavery in Massachusetts,” his political opinions often stray away from the issue and instead focus upon his political ideal in abstractions.

With the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, Thoreau began to recognize his inability to fully withdraw from this society. His participation in the abolitionist movement significantly increased. He not only helped move runaway slaves along the Underground Railroad, but also spoke at the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society’s Fourth of July rally — during which, as previously stated, Garrison notoriously burned a copy of the Constitution. In this speech, “Slavery in Massachusetts,” his argument for complete removal from political society seems less adamant than in “Resistance to Civil Government.” He argues that “it is men who have got to make the law free.”36 Although Thoreau still suggests the individual should withdraw from the national community, his rhetoric that men must right the system shows a Thoreau more willing to participate in the political fight instead of simply removing himself from politics altogether. However, his increasing involvement in the fight after 1850 somewhat mirrors Emerson’s more passionate anti-slavery stand. As his own experiences feel more direct pressure from the law, Thoreau becomes more heartily involved. While he may have a strong commitment to abolition, his work on the issue usually centers around white abolitionists and the dignity of occupying a morally commendable existence amid corruption. With this mindset, the problems of those suffering from slavery outside of the white abolitionist group become secondary concerns.

While this heroic idealism does not necessarily invalidate Thoreau’s abolitionist commitment, it does place him dangerously close to Delbanco’s archetype and its dilemmas.

Thoreau’s idealization of a violent, rash actor like John Brown neglects to identify the consequences of endorsing such extremist measures, including the reactionary pro-slavery responses that Brown’s actions inspired in both the North and the South. Furthermore, Thoreau’s lack of skepticism toward Brown’s actions implies that his own perspective fails to recognize practical matters when examining politics. In both senses, Thoreau’s political approach to abolition may easily be blinded by the moral crusader’s narrative. Even though Thoreau does not engage in violence himself, he does not draw a definitive line that establishes when its use is acceptable. Because of this, his moral idealism could lead to dehumanizing the enemy, and from there to overstepping the boundary between justified violence and simple murder.

However, this would assume that Thoreau’s political philosophy could incite such a level of action or influence. While Thoreau makes the case that refusing to participate in government is the purest form of protest, its actual efficacy seems limited at best. Considering both his moral idealism and complete removal from practical politics, Thoreau almost completely fails to fulfill Weber’s ethic of responsibility. Neither the sensible nor the tangible plays a significant role in his moral politics. This, in combination with his focus on heroic narrative, makes Thoreau’s political approach the closest match to Delbanco’s abolitionist archetype. His political philosophy embodies the same potential weaknesses Delbanco describes: inefficacy, absolute and dehumanizing language, failure to assess consequences, and moral piety taking priority over change.

Emerson, however, does not fit into Delbanco’s archetype as easily. He does strongly express the abolitionist archetype’s first two characteristics: belief in a higher law that conflicts with governmental law, and an overt focus on the self’s morality instead of the political issue.
Emerson’s theoretical arguments differ somewhat from his actual political approach to abolition, though, as he does advocates for less morally pure political options than his ideology emphasizes. Emerson found William Ellery Channing’s *Slavery*, an abolitionist work that advocated for gradual rather than immediate means for emancipation, extremely convincing. As he also gave a speech praising Abraham Lincoln’s issuing of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862, Emerson also escapes the absolutist moral trap that hinders Garrison’s and Thoreau’s political efficacy. In the two years prior to the Civil War, Emerson’s politics emerged more on the radical end of the abolition spectrum — he praised John Brown for his actions and even suggested that he was the ideally self-reliant man. However, even when he lauded Brown’s heroism after the Harper’s Ferry raid, he remarks that Brown “lost his head there.” This admiration then does not wholly contradict Emerson’s advocacy of more peaceful yet moderate means for abolition, even though it does show some notable glimpses of irresponsibility.

Although Emerson’s ideas may have expressed a heavy bias toward an ethic of ultimate ends, Emerson’s actual political views and actions regarding abolition convey a stronger balance between the ethic of ultimate ends and the ethic of responsibility. Emerson’s support for gradual emancipation, compensated emancipation, and political parties illustrates that he was willing to work within the current political system to achieve the goal at hand. He also participated in smaller-scale political acts, like helping in the Underground Railroad, that have less grandiose but still significant aspirations in combating slavery. In this sense, Emerson’s abolition mostly

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40 Ostrander, 23.
maintains the moderation that Delbanco thinks the abolitionists lack. Of course, Emerson still
pursues an ultimate end in working against slavery — an ethical failure that he sees societal
norms promoting. He also argues for the cause through strong moral rhetoric. However, since he
sees the political system as capable of righting itself through its current structural means,
Emerson appreciates attempts to achieve this goal through more cautious political acts.

While these Transcendentalists have similar political views, their political approaches to
slavery differ in ways that shape their relationship to Delbanco’s archetype. Both express strong
regard for absolute moral truths, and believe that government misleads its citizens in these
matters. Because of their focus on the individual’s conflict with society, their interests often shift
toward the individual’s relationship with morality/immorality instead of the immoral policy in
question. However, because Emerson sees the need to assess consequences in his moral
calculations, his actual political approach to slavery usually displays a willingness to participate
within the system to pursue moral change. Through this, he overcomes the possible
complications that may result from the first two abolitionist characteristics. Thoreau, in contrast,
excessively focuses upon the individual’s heroic pursuit of morality to the point that it blinds him
from recognizing consequentialist morality’s importance. Because his narrative often
concentrates more upon the individual’s moral character than the issue at hand, Thoreau fails to
evaluate how his actions may affect the political world around him. With these three factors in
mind, he not only embodies an unhealthily severe dependence upon the ethic of ultimate ends,
but also Delbanco’s abolitionist archetype.
“LET JUSTICE BE DONE, THOUGH THE HEAVENS FALL”: GARRISON’S MORAL POLITICS

William Lloyd Garrison (1805-1877) probably has the most recognizable abolitionist name for the contemporary reader. Garrison first emerged on the abolition scene in 1829 when he defected from and denounced the American Colonization Society, a popular organization promoting the colonization of free African Americans in Liberia. From then on, he gave a multitude of lectures on the subject of slavery, encouraging his fellow Northerners to recognize and condemn the immoral institution. In 1831, he began publishing his weekly newspaper, The Liberator, to further advocate for the immediate emancipation of slaves. He garnered many supporters not only in New England but throughout the entire country. During the 1830s, he founded the New England Anti-Slavery Society (later known as the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society) and helped lead the American Anti-Slavery Society.\(^{41}\)

Although Delbanco does not attack Garrison’s politics at length, his critique of historical abolitionists often refers to Garrison’s philosophies with skepticism. He refers to Garrison more than any other abolitionist — with the only possible exception of Frederick Douglass. His consistent focus upon Garrison makes sense, due to Garrison’s leadership in the movement, the praise he has received from scholars today, and his radical ideological stances. The scholar Manisha Sinha passionately defends Garrisonian radicalism in her response essay to Delbanco, suggesting that Delbanco dismisses the integrity in Garrisonian politics.\(^{42}\) Despite the hindsight


contemporary scholars like Sinha have regarding Garrison’s political action, Delbanco emphasizes that his immediate and uncompromising emancipation seemed extreme during his lifetime.43 Because of his radical arguments, Garrison’s name presented a notoriety that divided abolitionists within their organizations.44 This difference between the contemporary scholar’s view and his peers’ reactions to his politics highlights Delbanco’s major concern with the abolitionist archetype: because most people today recognize Garrison’s cause as just, our understanding of the role overlooks the extreme and questionable aspects of abolitionist action that his historical companions observed.

Like Thoreau and Emerson, Garrison strongly emphasizes the concept of higher law and often places it in contrast with societal norms and laws. He saturates his rhetoric with moral, religious language. Even in his first anti-slavery address, Garrison continually uses terms like “evil,” “God,” and “Christian” when discussing slavery’s immorality. He argues that the Northern free states’ complicity with the South’s systemic slavery is “another evil” in itself, implying that the state’s lack of avid opposition is absolutely immoral.45 Following this thought, he suggests that “before God… such a glaring contradiction as exists between our creed and practice the annals of six thousand years cannot parallel.”46 As this quote makes obvious, Garrison consistently wove religious themes into most of his ethical claims. Although his appeal for human rights and arguments about American hypocrisy could still present valid arguments in a less religious speech, Garrison nonetheless refers to God and Christianity whenever possible.

43 Delbanco, 4.
44 Garrison’s controversial role in the movement also stemmed from his advocacy for women’s rights and participation within the movement.
46 Ibid.
In this sense, Garrison frames even his earliest anti-slavery arguments with higher law standards. His critique of politics culminates in his 1854 Fourth of July speech, referred to above, where he declares the Constitution a “covenant with death” and “an agreement with Hell” after burning a copy of the Constitution on-stage.\(^47\) By using such heavy language, Garrison’s moral arguments present the same anti-government fervor apparent in Thoreau’s speech from the same rally. With this in mind, Garrison’s belief in higher law — although more religious in nature than Thoreau’s language— reflects many of the same characteristics found in Thoreau’s and Emerson’s critiques of society and politics.

His focus on the individual’s relationship to the cause, however, does not offer the same clear stance obvious in Thoreau’s political philosophy. Like Thoreau, Garrison did not believe in supporting political parties or voting. Delbanco mentions this, stating that Garrison believes that “no true abolitionist should participate in electoral politics.”\(^48\) Garrison argues that the Constitution was an inherently pro-slavery document.\(^49\) Because the document serves as the government’s framework, he believes that the political system could only ever perpetuate slavery.\(^50\) Without another revolution, Garrison could not imagine emancipation. However, while Thoreau’s stance on this issue solidifies his focus on the self’s moral piety rather than the cause, Garrison’s appears ambiguously between an obsession with his own moral piety and a genuine commitment to the cause. Although Thoreau usually focuses upon this point in relation to the


\(^{48}\) Delbanco, 8.


\(^{50}\) Interestingly, Garrison strongly believed that the Declaration of Independence was an anti-slavery document. For Garrison, the Declaration of Independence is what the government should have based its values on. Because of the Constitution and the Declaration’s disconnect on the issue of slavery, Garrison suggested that a second revolution would have to occur. Ibid., 69.
anti-government individual’s heroism, Garrison actually dedicates notable portions of his discussion to slaves and their mistreatment. In his “Address at Park Street Church,” Garrison discusses how “the condition of the slaves is… deplorable, entitling him to a higher consideration… What has Christianity done, by direct effort, for our slave population? Comparatively nothing.” Here, he directly refers to the slaves and their suffering and emphasizes the failure among white Northerners to change such “deplorable” conditions. With this humanizing perspective in mind, Garrison’s rhetorical focus upon the Northern individual’s relationship with slavery may partially serve as an effective appeal to his audience instead of only expressing Garrison’s own self-congratulations.

His most troubling form of self-preoccupation may be his and his followers’ advocacy for disunion. During the 1840s, The Liberator published multiple articles about the abolitionist petition to Congress to dissolve the Union. In these articles, he describes the argument: “that secession from the government is a religious and political duty... that it is impractical for tyrants and the enemies of tyranny to coalesce and legislate together for the preservations of human rights, or the promotion of the interests of Liberty.” Based upon his followers’ — notably Wendell Phillips’ — support for this measure, the newspaper’s adoption of the slogan NO UNION WITH SLAVEHOLDERS as the header for its coverage, and his letters to Rev. Samuel J. May, Garrison very likely supported secession from the South. The solution of disunion emphasizes the Northerners’ self-preoccupation, as secession would ultimately leave slavery as

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51 Garrison, “An Address at Park Street Church.”
an institution unchanged. The May 31st, 1844 article on this issue — quoted above —
emphasizes disunion as the North’s “religious and political duty.” By suggesting this method
over one that may eradicate slavery within the Southern states, Garrison and his companions see
a stronger moral obligation to remove slavery from their own individual political spheres rather
than to destroy slavery itself. With this portrayal of abolition, Garrison, although less
self-centered than Thoreau, may overvalue maintaining his own moral purity when pursuing
political action. In this sense, he fulfills Delbanco’s second archetypal characteristic.

To the extent that he exhibits the abolitionist archetype’s first two characteristics,
Garrison’s political approach to the abolition movement does reflect Weber’s ethic of ultimate
ends. In his censure of the American Colonization Society, Garrison emphasizes this position
himself by including in his “letters of light”: “‘DUTY, AND NOT CONSEQUENCES’ — ‘LET
JUSTICE BE DONE, THOUGH THE HEAVENS FALL.’”54 This quote seems to almost exactly
reiterate Weber’s description of the ethic of ultimate ends, as it explicitly dismisses
consequentialist morality in its advocacy for righteous action. Moral piety defines Garrison’s
politics. He refuses to compromise on any stance he addresses, including “IMMEDIATE
ABOLITION,” “NO COMPROMISE WITH OPPRESSORS,” and “EQUAL RIGHTS.”55 He
also denies the possibility of working within a corrupt system or with those most morally
culpable within the system. In his stubborn radicalism, any inability to meet the moral standards
he has established would allow him to sacrifice significant progress in abolishing slavery for the
sake of his own moral purity.

54 William Lloyd Garrison, “Exposure to American Colonization Society,” Selections from the Writings and
55 Ibid.
His rigid morality does produce, however, some subtle elements of responsible politics. No matter how radical his own politics became, he consistently discouraged the use of violence. These nonviolent tactics lessen the potential negative consequences for his activism and his image. Violence is not always irresponsible in radical politics. However, as Garrison aims more at appealing to the public than forcefully overthrowing the government, Garrison’s commitment to nonviolence significantly limits the danger of violent political escalation. If his effective rhetoric encouraged violence while he held significant influence over the movement’s organizations, then his followers may have adopted more brutal methods in their activism. Of course, this aversion to violence largely derives from his ethic of ultimate ends, as he prioritizes moral practices above all else. However, it minimizes the possibility of certain negative consequences like excessive deaths, harsher reactionary backlash, and less favorability among the public.

In addition, his moral piety garnered effective results at the movement’s beginning, helping bring the topic to Northerners’ attention and reminding them that this is also their burden. Garrison’s political philosophy insists that “the free States… are constitutionally involved in the guilt of slavery by adhering to the national compact that sanctions it… and it is their duty to assist in its overthrow.” The Christian rhetoric he uses may have presented an attractive argument for his New England audiences — a regional group whose culture developed from Protestant individualism — to act upon this issue. By highlighting the Northerner’s guilt in

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56 This statement is most certainly a “what if” statement. It would assume that most other abolitionists would even follow this idea, which would be highly unlikely given their own general hesitation toward his radical ideas already. However, with Garrison’s strong commitment as well as his speaking and organizational abilities, one could imagine him garnering some significant support if he decided at any point to endorse violent action (e.g., John Brown’s incident, agreeing with Garnet’s Address, encouraging violence after 1850 Fugitive Slave Law when tensions rose, etc.).

57 Garrison, “An Address at Park Street Church.”
this immoral institution, Garrison emphasizes the necessity for Northerners to find some
self-interest within the topic. Like his non-violence position, his pious rhetoric derives from his
concern with slavery’s moral impediment on Northern moral lives, and thereby partially stems
from Weber’s ethic of ultimate ends. However, before the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law forced
Northerners into the national discourse about slavery, Garrison’s argument garnered support
during a time where slavery fell short of the North’s immediate attention. Because his moral
politics operated through responsible non-violent actions, journal publications, and speeches, his
movement appealed to the public’s hesitant yet strong moral sophistications.

Garrison represents a stronger and somewhat more responsible political approach than
Delbanco’s argument suggests, especially during the movement’s early years. Garrison’s
political actions did not encourage mass violence or destroy any progress inside or outside of
Congress. Garrison also urges against the extremist political actions John Brown takes despite
showing sympathy for his goals. In fact, his weakness is that he may have inspired too little of
an effect on the political system rather than too much. In this sense, although Delbanco’s
archetypal portrait of the abolitionist does somewhat capture Garrison’s political form, his
politics do not present the great threat Delbanco fears. I also do not see Garrison’s political
approach translating into today’s pro-choice advocates antagonizing woman walking into a
Planned Parenthood, as Delbanco believes it does. He instead relies upon information utilized as
power, emphasizing speeches and publications in most of his activist work. While they inspire

58 Garrison did face lynch mobs at times. However, this response stems less from his political approach
than from pro-slavery citizens reacting through violent methods.
public interest and awareness, Garrison’s politics often remain outside of the system’s political decisions and do not directly threaten public safety.

However, even if his politics are not as potentially dangerous as Delbanco implies, Garrison’s heavily-skewed emphasis on ultimate ends does present major obstacles for protest politics. While Garrison can start and fuel these radical ideas for ethical political action, he fails to present enough sentiment for concluding this political struggle. Not only does Garrison refuse to imagine that the government in place may allow for important change, but he also promotes possible solutions where slavery is not even eradicated. In not only accepting the idea but advocating dissolution of the Union, Garrison implies that transforming his own relationship to slavery takes precedence over abolishing slavery itself. Garrison does not search incessantly for a true end to slavery, and thereby presents a form of political action that cannot consistently produce results. Beyond raising awareness, Garrison’s political action cannot fulfill the progress for which he so strongly advocates. In this sense, Garrison still neglects to pursue an ethic of responsibility to the degree necessary for successful political action.

BLACK MILITANT ABOLITIONISTS: HENRY HIGHLAND GARNET, DAVID WALKER, AND AGENCY

David Walker (1796-1830) and Henry Highland Garnet (1815-1882) were two of the most influential black abolitionists. Walker strongly advocated for abolition and the need for black education during a time when abolition only began to gain momentum. In 1829, he published his *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* — a radical protest piece that aimed to encourage black readers to fight against their oppression. He unfortunately died before most
notable abolition organizations emerged. However, his early role in the movement — although more extreme than most white abolitionists following him — brought attention to the issue before popular opposition grew.

Henry Highland Garnet was a newspaper editor and a Presbyterian minister who supported militant forms of abolition and, later, the emigration of free black Americans. He broke with the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1840 and helped found the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society the same year with the Tappan brothers and other black ministers. This split partially resulted from his intense disagreements with Frederick Douglass and the Garrisonians, especially regarding his advocacy for strong political action beyond moral suasion. This conflict became especially obvious when Garnet presented his 1843 speech “An Address to the Slaves of the United States of America,” in which he called for open rebellion among the slaves. At the National Negro Convention where this was presented, Douglass spoke against Garnet’s suggestion and encouraged other convention delegates to vote against its adoption.

Delbanco mentions neither Henry Highland Garnet nor David Walker in his analysis. In fact, other than Frederick Douglass, no black abolitionist appears in “The Abolitionist Imagination.” While Delbanco mainly aims his attack at white abolitionists, black abolitionist figures do partially fit his model of the problematic abolitionist. Sinha’s essay also emphasizes the importance of both Walker’s and Garnet’s radicalism to the abolition movement. Therefore, their exclusion from the discussion seems surprising. Darryl Pinckney indirectly addresses the issue.

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63 Sinha, 93-95.
Delbanco’s lack of black representation, suggesting that his neglect reflects the historical field’s general failure to properly analyze these figures.\textsuperscript{64}

Whatever Delbanco’s reason for excluding black abolitionists from his discussion, his argument lacks nuance because of their absence. Many of the same problems with consequentialist morality emerge in David Walker’s and Henry Highland Garnet’s political approaches. However, these two thinkers invert the abolitionist archetype’s relationship to morality. While the white abolitionists often fail to address the issue of slavery without a somewhat self-centered lens, black abolitionists completely prioritize restoring agency and rights to black slaves. As their central goal differs, their relationships to Weberian ethics — while still often unbalanced — promote certain traits that white abolitionists lack.

Both Garnet and Walker express a strong devotion to religious law that they believe society and government contradict in the case of slavery. They integrated Christianity into their activist rhetoric just as much as — if not more than — Garrison and his followers. In fact, their emphasis on violent action in their arguments derives from their interpretations of Christian higher law. During his 1843 speech, Garnet uses Christian philosophy as a justification for slave rebellions:

\textit{TO SUCH DEGRADATION IT IS SINFUL IN THE EXTREME FOR YOU TO MAKE VOLUNTARY SUBMISSION.} The divine commandments you are in duty bound to reverence and obey… But slavery sets all these at nought, and hurls defiance in the face of Jehovah… If a band of heathen men should attempt to enslave a race of Christians, and to place their children under the influence of some false religion, surely Heaven would frown upon the men who would not resist such aggression, even to death.\textsuperscript{65}


\textsuperscript{65} Garnet.
For Garnet, slavery for the slave is “sinful in the extreme” because it places Christians under the power of those actively defying Christian virtues, and demands that these Christians follow a life that contradicts Christian doctrine. Although slave owners often devoutly identify as Christian, their embrace of slavery contradicts true Christian values. In this sense, Garnet views the slaveholders’ so-called Christian identities with contempt. As Garnet’s argument portrays the slaveholder — an actor accepting and encouraging the government’s corrupt institution — as an infidel, he clearly does not regard the importance or validity of the government’s laws. In fact, he explicitly theorizes that Christian law requires the individual to resist this legal practice — even if violence or killing is necessary.

Walker presents a similar logic, saturating his abolitionist argument with Judeo-Christian language and allegory. In his *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, he asserts: “Look upon your mother, wife and children, and answer God Almighty; and believe this, that it is no more harm for you to kill a man, who is trying to kill you, than it is for you to take a drink of water when thirsty; in fact, the man who will stand still and let another murder him, is worse than an infidel…” In this metaphor, the oppressed either “answer[s] God” by resisting his murder or “is worse than an infidel” if he allows himself to be murdered. By complying with contemporary society’s abusive system, the victim betrays religious law and therefore violates his own moral identity. Walker further frames his claim by comparing the slaves’ situation to the Jews’ Exodus from Egypt — a religiously just revolution that required the oppressed to use violence to achieve their goals. Because both Garnet and Walker morally justify killing those who enforced the corrupt institution, the two political actors may have subscribed to an even more extreme belief

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67 Ibid., 9.
in higher law and society’s corruption than Thoreau, Emerson, or Garrison. While Thoreau and Garrison suggest that the Constitution reflected a contract with “Hell” or “the Devil,” both Garnet and Walker push the moral requirement further by demanding a physical assault against the unjust system.

However, while these white abolitionists usually failed to get past their obsession with personal morality, Walker and Garnet called for political change and sought to restore others’ agency. In “An Address to the Slaves of the United States of America,” Henry Highland Garnet centers his rhetoric on this divide between his plan of action and the Garrisonians’ emphasis on moral suasion. He states: “The North has done much—her opinion of slavery in the abstract is known. But in regard to the South, we adopt the opinion of the New York Evangelist—We have advanced so far, that the cause apparently waits for a more effectual door to be thrown open than has been yet. We are about to point out that more effectual door.” Garnet does not outright dismiss Garrison and New England abolitionists’ contributions to fighting slavery. He acknowledges the importance of their work so far. However, he regards their opinion as “abstract” — failing to understand the depth of slavery’s assault upon the human soul. Because Northerners often lack the personal experience of and proximity to slavery’s brutality, they see moral suasion as the best path until more opportunities arise for positive political action. As a former slave, Garnet recognizes the “untold agonies” plaguing the country’s enslaved citizens, and therefore realizes the urgency with which slavery must be abolished. Unlike Garrison and Thoreau, Garnet did support the Free Soil Party (and the Liberty Party) even though he strongly denounced the immorality of American politics. While American society and politics often

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68 Garnet.
69 Ibid.
70 Schor, 33.
translate to injustice for Garnet, he still encourages direct engagement with political institutions. In this sense, Garnet believed that substantial and more immediate political action, including possible violence, must take precedence over moral rhetoric.

In combination with their call for action, Garnet’s and Walker’s language and intentions facilitate a strong commitment to achieving abolition. Garrison, Thoreau, and Emerson direct their arguments to white Northerners to persuade them of the evils occurring in the distant South. Although they sympathize with the slaves they discuss, they mostly address the enslaved as abstractions. Thoreau and Emerson’s discussions, especially, generally lack personal depictions of slaves, as they most strongly illustrate Delbanco’s claim about abolitionist self-preoccupation. Through their self-centered lenses, their political theories largely lack the empathy needed to properly understand and respond to slavery’s evils. Garnet and Walker, however, designed their works to serve as tools to immediately return agency to the oppressed. Walker specifically directs his *Appeal* to current slaves, even stating in his title that the work is “...Addressed to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particularly and Very Expressly to Those of the United States of America.” His pamphlet assumes that the reader comes from the African-American perspective, and delves deep into slave culture. Garnet’s does the same, as he titled his speech “An Address to the Slaves of the United States” and first presented it at a National Negro Convention — a gathering consisting of only the oppressed race in question. Also, both Walker’s and Garnet’s pamphlets were smuggled into the South for black slaves to read like manifestos. Unlike the other abolitionists, their literature directly reached and addressed the oppressed. Through their approach, Garnet and Walker provided black Americans with a political awareness, and suggested that they do have the right and the power to rebel against the injustices
they currently face. Through both this personal recognition of the slave and the encouragement of slave to develop a more sophisticated political consciousness, the two abolitionists present productive action within the issue’s most affected regions by inciting slaves to pursue political agency.

Even though both of these abolitionists present a more empathetic approach to abolition politics, their political philosophies also offer more dangers in terms of consequences than their white counterparts’ abolitionism. Garnet and Walker are careful to highlight that their radical political philosophies explicitly grew from extreme political situations, especially upon complete and total oppression of a group. In less cruel and repressive situations — where people’s lives and identities are not constantly assaulted with violence and dehumanization — Garnet and Walker would probably not suggest violent or extreme political action as a solution. Of course, even when dealing with this severely cruel predicament, Garnet and Walker do not provide an ideal response. Their most significant weakness is their failure to assess long-term outcomes. While both encourage slaves to rebel, the idea of a slave uprising is already questionable in its efficacy. Even if it is executed effectively, the backlash the anti-slavery movement may face could be catastrophic. Walker’s and Garnet’s ideas could also incite a severe and violent reaction from pro-slavery citizens, potentially leading to the increased abuse of remaining slaves and the murder of those who are free or have escaped. In this sense, while only a handful of slaves may escape in the most successful uprising, the majority of the slave population would remain in slaveowners’ custody and would experience worse treatment than before.

Garnet and Walker’s approaches may not only provoke negative effects on the slaves’ everyday lives, but they also have the potential to cause fatal harm to the movement. Both Garnet
and Walker frame their acts of violence as religiously just, using similar rhetoric in their moral explanations to Weber’s description of the ethic of ultimate ends (e.g., “the Christian does rightly and leaves their results with the Lord”). Of course, extreme violence is not always unavoidable, especially in such drastic situations. The Bible does not exclude violence as a political tool, as is obvious with Walker’s Exodus example. However, this justification may not reach the public’s ears. Although the slaves attempt to achieve dignity and equality, the slave rebellions Walker and Garnet encourage might actually cause the public to fear and dehumanize African Americans even more. With a growing fear of both the issue’s victims and abolition itself, a violent rebellion would inhibit future efforts to completely abolish slavery because the public would view abolitionism as more dangerous than they originally considered. In this sense, both Garnet and Walker fulfill Delbanco’s biggest concern with the abolitionist archetype — the protester’s political actions inhibiting and reversing productive change for a good cause.

On the whole, both Garnet and Walker reflect elements of Delbanco’s abolitionist archetypal character. However, they escape the abolitionist’s archetypal tendency to obsess over the self’s private moral being. In some ways, they may even agree with many of Delbanco’s critiques. Delbanco expresses frustration with Garrison’s intense moral focus and his obsession with moral piety. While Walker and Garnet use strong moral and religious language, as well, Thoreau and Emerson focus more upon slavery’s immorality and its implications for the Northerner rather than for the suffering population. This offers an important distinction between these black abolitionists and the white Northern abolitionists who do not aim strongly enough at inciting change. However, Garnet and Walker’s drive to act may be what makes their political

71 Weber, 23.
approaches so dangerous. Because they do not shy away from violence or taking direct action, their politics have more potential to damage the people involved than Garrison’s focus upon moral suasion. Moreover, they could fulfill Delbanco’s ultimate fear: that the abolitionists’ radical actions may reverse any progress the movement has already made. With this understanding, the lack of caution both black abolitionists exhibit in emphasizing immediate action may be considered a less-than-complete consequentialist morality in practice. While these black abolitionists surpass the white abolitionists’ subpar grasp of the issue’s actual victims, their politics are much more radical and much less responsible than the Garrisonians in some aspects.

DELBANCO’S HERO: HAWTHORNE’S MODERATE COMMUNAL POLITICS

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) was a well-known Anti-Transcendentalist author that occupied the same Concord intellectual milieu as Thoreau and Emerson. In his literature, Hawthorne often portrayed dark themes that challenged the Transcendentalists’ more optimistic views about human nature. As the Transcendentalists envisioned the individual as an intuitive bearer of higher law’s knowledge, Hawthorne suggested that humanity has inherently immoral qualities. Through his literature’s political allegories, Hawthorne expressed an awareness of evil that, he believed, both the compliant majority and the protesting individual often fail to address. In terms of abolition, Nathaniel Hawthorne did not participate in the movement and actually criticized abolitionists in an unpublished manuscript.72

While Delbanco rejects the abolitionists’ politics, he advocates for their literary contemporary Nathaniel Hawthorne and his hesitance in supporting abolition. Because he

72 Delbanco, 24.
accepts the individual’s corruption, Hawthorne remains skeptical of the Transcendentalist’s pursuit of moral living through political withdrawal. He strongly echoes Delbanco’s own caution in lauding the morally righteous abolitionist. Like the nineteenth-century Anti-Transcendentalist, Delbanco sees the abolitionist’s absolutist language and lack of self-doubt as dangerous because it fails to recognize humanity’s capacity to act immorally. Delbanco’s praise for Hawthorne has some merit, as his literature suggests that the protester should exercise caution when demonizing all of society and claiming it as separate from himself. Hawthorne also expresses a similar concern that the self-righteous political actor may fail to help or improve his society because he draws so strict a boundary between himself and his community. However, as John Stauffer points out in his response to Delbanco, his praise idealizes Delbanco’s literary “art” and confuses it with “politics.”⁷³ Although Hawthorne presents admirable political philosophies within his fictional narratives, Hawthorne’s actual stance on abolition stems more from a racist perspective than a liberal-yet-cautious one.

Hawthorne’s literary philosophy inverts the abolitionist archetype’s qualities. In contrast to the abolitionist’s vision of higher law as just and society as immoral, Hawthorne portrays evil as innate in both society and human nature. His critique of this archetypal abolitionist view especially emerges in his short story “Young Goodman Brown,” where its title protagonist shuns his townspeople after encountering them at a devilish meeting. Brown, like many other Hawthorne protagonists, is a romantic individual within a corrupt world who realizes others’ moral failures and rejects his society in search of moral piety. When he sees his society’s interaction with evil, Brown cannot stop envisioning evil within his societal institutions and

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family. However, Brown does not recognize the irony in his moral stance, as he himself often exhibits the same corrupt characteristics that he observes in society.

This critique of morally rigid individualism directly attacks Emerson’s and Thoreau’s philosophies. Young Goodman Brown tries to separate himself from the society he believes is cooperating with the Devil. However, he overlooks that he also attended the meeting for which he judges his community. In this sense, he mocks the concept of self-reliance allowing for moral discovery because it neglects to recognize how the withdrawn individual possesses the same traits he rejects. The Devil with the narrative announces to Brown’s community: “Welcome… to the communion of your race!” In Hawthorne’s opinion, humanity’s character is inherently corrupt. Although the individual may recognize a form of corruption within society and pursue its eradication, the thought that he may fully overcome this corruption in his individual existence is naive. In order to truly achieve change — in both politics and lifestyle — the individual must accept the corruption in the himself and his actions.

The irony in Brown’s morality extends to the abolitionist archetypal role, especially in terms of the individual’s self-centered approach to virtue. As Brown attempts to separate himself from society, he becomes a bitter and twisted man. The reader sees Brown’s joyous and loving experiences with his new wife Faith transform into a consistent dismissal of her after his revelation, reflecting his own lack of sympathy with others and his inability to present positive action against the evil he sees. The character’s idealistic moral code, ironically, proves morally depraved. Moreover, Hawthorne concludes the narrative with Goodman Brown’s funeral, stating that his neighbors “carved no hopeful verse upon his tombstone; for his dying hour was gloom.”

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75 Ibid., 146.
As his community does not sketch a “hopeful verse” upon his grave, Brown failed to incite change in the society he judged during his withdrawal. With this, Hawthorne implies that Thoreau’s, Garrison’s, and Emerson’s focus upon the self’s relationship to morality begets little progress. In a more extreme form of social withdrawal like Thoreau’s, Hawthorne suggests that the individual may even sacrifice their personal connections with others in pursuit of this unachievable purity.

In accepting corruption while pursuing positive change, Hawthorne’s literary politics demonstrate the strongest balance between an ethic of ultimate ends and an ethic of responsibility discussed so far. Hawthorne sees the value in the individual bettering society and attempting to critique its morality. However, he consistently questions the individual’s own intentions in pursuing this cause. For the Anti-Transcendentalist, the individual must participate in community and the political process to produce progress. While this may require the individual to adopt immoral actions to facilitate efficacy, this corruption is morally ambiguous rather than absolutely evil. Through this understanding, both consequentialist morality and absolutist morality remain important in pursuing ethical political action.

Although Hawthorne’s philosophical awareness of corruption is admirable, his actual stance on abolition is more than lacking. Delbanco strongly praises Hawthorne for his moderate stance in the face of radicalism. However, Hawthorne’s moderate views on the abolition movement partially stem from his racist attitudes. In John Stauffer’s response to Delbanco, he cites an example from 1846 where Hawthorne compares the value of a white man’s life to that of a black man’s: “A civilized and educate man must feel somewhat like a fool, methinks, when he

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Ibid., 149.
has stakes his own life against that of a black savage…”

Even into the 1850s, Hawthorne argued that slavery was a “benign institution” that incited “peace and affection” between the “taskmaster and the serf.” He makes many of these comments in the biography he wrote about President Franklin Pierce, a Democrat that heavily endorsed the Fugitive Slave Law. Beyond criticizing the abolition movement in short stories or Pierce’s biography, Hawthorne does not even participate in the country’s dialogue about the issue of slavery.

While Garrison’s political approach may fail in completing its mission, Hawthorne’s liberal resolve does not even take shape within the political sphere. Even though Hawthorne’s literary ideas offer a balanced ethics, Delbanco cannot persuasively promote Hawthorne’s political approach when it barely acts. Rather than advocating moderate politics, Hawthorne simply reinforces the status quo with his thoughts on this issue — especially through his own racial biases. In the same manner that Young Goodman Brown fails to assess his own evil amid judging others, Hawthorne himself compares ideations of abolition to insanity while failing to acknowledge where his own ideas may stem from morally dubious influences. He does not recognize the problems within his own racism, and in this sense lacks the same type of self-assessment Delbanco wants from Garrison.

In fact, while examining the issue of abolition, I have difficulty understanding why Delbanco champions Hawthorne as the unsung hero of political action, because he is only a footnote to this American political issue. While his literature’s arguments for compromise may present promising prospects for politics, his actual actions only advocate blocking political change. Resistance will always exist against major political change and may often even serve a

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77 Stauffer, 63.
78 Ibid., 64.
79 Ibid., 63.
productive role. However, in merely regurgitating racist thoughts and denouncing political change without constructive criticism, Hawthorne seems to produce a blindly reactionary response without articulating viable reasons for disagreeing. He not only fails to add to abolition’s intellectual discourse, but he inhibits the consideration of taking significant political action. Therefore, when discussing protest politics or ethical issues, Hawthorne in practice presents another dangerous end on this spectrum — the Democratic Party’s stubborn traditions impeding conversations about slavery’s ethical problems.

THE ABOLITIONIST OVERLOOKED: FREDERICK DOUGLASS AND WHY HIS POLITICAL APPROACH MATTERS

Frederick Douglass (1818-1895) was one of the most prominent and influential abolitionists in the movement. Born a slave, Douglass spent the first twenty years of his life on Maryland plantations. In 1838, he escaped to the free state New York, where he married his love interest Anne Murray. Soon afterward, the couple moved to New Bedford, Massachusetts and he became a licensed preacher. As Douglass became involved of the state’s abolitionist discourse, he and Garrison quickly developed a correspondence with one another. From there, Douglass rose to prominence as an anti-slavery lecturer with the support of Garrison and his colleagues. He published his first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, in 1845. During the 1850s, Douglass ended his political and personal relationship with Garrison, and he began to transform his philosophies regarding the American

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81 Ibid., 24.
82 Ibid., 25.
83 Ibid., 26.
political system’s ability to eradicate slavery. Before the Civil War started, Douglass expressed support for the Republican candidate and later-President Abraham Lincoln.

Although “The Abolitionist Imagination” refers to Douglass and his political philosophies more than to any other abolitionist, Andrew Delbanco does not criticize Douglass’ politics. In fact, Delbanco juxtaposes Douglass’ abolitionist stances to the abolitionists he finds problematic, as he discusses Douglass’ opposition to John Brown’s Harpers Ferry raid, his shift away from Garrisonian politics, and his praise for Lincoln amid other abolitionists’ distrust of politicians. Through these examples, Delbanco implies that Douglass’s political philosophy — especially in his later abolitionist years — expresses an understanding of consequentialist morality that the majority of abolitionists do not. Delbanco does not include Douglass among his historical heroes, however, and fails to explicitly expand upon his politics.

Like every other abolitionist, Frederick Douglass expressed a strong commitment to higher law. In his 1852 “The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro” speech, Douglass analyzes the United States’ founding and the need to examine political issues through a more religious perspective than a historical one. After discussing the country’s Founding Fathers, he states: “My business, if I have any here to-day, is with the present. The accepted time with God and His cause is the ever-living now… Let the dead past bury its dead; Act, act in the living present, Heart within, and God overhead… The evil, that men do, lives after them, The good is oft interred with their bones.” Here, Douglass frames the problematic history of American politics and slavery through metaphors about “God”’s guidance and harbored evil. He describes how the immorality existing in an older generation continues through the impact they leave upon society

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84 Delbanco, 6-10.
and institutions. Douglass suggests that Americans should question their political history, and learn focus upon the present — “the accepted time with God and his cause.” With his emphasis on God, Douglass presents a higher law argument that attempts to transcend the political and societal norms to which his peers have grown accustomed.

However, Douglass’ moral skepticism about government offers a less absolutist perspective than abolitionists like Garrison or Thoreau present. During Douglass’s early abolitionist career, he often expressed beliefs similar to Garrison’s about the Constitution and the political process. Since he interpreted the Constitution as a pro-slavery document, Douglass saw the government’s fundamental structure as incapable of eradicating slavery because every government channel reeked of this corruption. However, by his 1852 July Fourth address, Douglass had renounced this interpretation and instead argued that the Constitution was “a glorious liberty document.” Douglass continues the claim: “take the Constitution according to its plain reading, and I defy the presentation of a single pro-slavery clause in it. On the other hand, it will be found to contain principles and purposes, entirely hostile to the existence of slavery.” With his new belief that the Constitution opposed slavery, Douglass begins to acknowledge the possibility of virtue in the country’s political system. This sentiment strays from the Thoreauvian or Garrisonian demonization of government, and positions Douglass’ moral dichotomy between the conscientious individual and his government as one of the least extreme among the abolitionists analyzed in this argument. Furthermore, while Douglass criticizes the Founding Fathers’ corrupt involvement with slavery, he highlights his admiration

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86 Delbanco, 8.
87 Douglass.
88 Ibid.
for their political endeavors. Although Douglass does use the term “evil” to describe their legacy, he portrays their actions as morally complex rather than reflections of the Devil. In this way, Douglass establishes that the perceived dichotomy between morality and American government ignores the ambiguities found in real American political history.

With this understanding of moral ambiguity in mind, Douglass avoids the white abolitionists’ obsession with their own individual virtue. Douglass remained firmly committed to the abolitionist cause and did not doubt in any sense that slavery was an evil institution. However, by resisting the abolitionist archetypal tendency to indulge in exaggerated heroic narratives, Douglass’s lack of glorifying rhetoric encourages more self-awareness concerning the individual’s role in the movement. Douglass consistently aims at ending slavery and never accepts measure that fail to promote issues that may potentially ignore its eradication. Douglass praises Lincoln for keeping the Union together, which contrasts with Garrison’s call for disunion to alleviate the North’s complicit guilt in slavery. This also appears in his opposition to colonization efforts, which he believed were attempts to ignore the problem of inequality within the nation by displacing free African Americans.

Even when Douglass considers his own relation to abolition, his story illustrates a black American reclaiming agency rather than a personal pursuit of virtue. Douglass first gained prominence within the abolitionist community by telling his story of enslavement and his quest for freedom. His first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,* places this same type of emphasis on Douglass’ personal relationship with slavery. As an individual

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89 Ibid.
90 Delbanco, 15.
passionately driven to defy the oppressive system, he may fit Thoreau’s standards for a radical hero. However, his goal within the narrative is not to achieve heroic virtue but rather freedom, agency, and identity. In the *Narrative*, Douglass pursues every opportunity to gain knowledge and self-reliance placed in front of him. He portrays this struggle as one rooted in power dynamics, though, as his slave status denies him the rights to these qualities. Following his description of his bloody brawl with a slavemaster, Douglass wrote: “This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free.”

Douglass’ focus upon his own freedom and power. He does not attempt to argue that his actions occupied a morally virtuous role or even were part of a necessary evil. Instead, this incident “revived” part of him because of its heavy implications for reclaiming agency. Therefore, Douglass’ self-centered anti-slavery arguments do not chase after moral piety — a possible distraction to the anti-slavery cause. They instead glorify the slave’s pursuit for freedom and agency — the cause’s main objective.

In this sense, Douglass understands consequentialist morality’s importance within protest politics when many of his abolitionist contemporaries do not. He especially exhibits this contrasting political morality when addressing violence and political parties. While Douglass often sides with Garrison against violent abolitionist action, his opposition stems from the action’s potential counterproductivity rather than from an unbending moral conviction. Douglass speaks against Garnet’s proposal for armed rebellion because of its large-scale violence. He also

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discourages John Brown’s Harpers Ferry raid when Brown details his plan to him. Unlike Garrison, however, Douglass never dismisses violence as a legitimate option. He publicly discusses his own use of violence in his personal narrative, portraying it as a catalyst for regaining his individual freedom.

When he gives reasons for his opposition to violent political plans, he does not convey any notion that may suggest he absolutely objects to the plans’ violence. In his opposition to Garnet’s Address, Douglass argues that there was “too much violence in the Address and that strictly nonviolence means should be continued a little longer…” Douglass implies that his political philosophy specifically disapproves of violence within this context, and that his belief in “strictly nonviolent means” only applies for the time being. In addition, Douglass’s reason for discouraging Brown’s violent rebellion was because it would “rivet the fetters more firmly than ever on the limbs of the enslaved.” In both situations, Douglass sees these political proposals as more detrimental than beneficial to the cause. Violent action would likely inspire fear among both the sympathetic and the oppressive groups. With Douglass’ fervent aim of gaining public support for the cause, he recognizes violence as potentially inciting the loss of political support from the North. Furthermore, the oppressive abuse Southern African Americans receive could increase in response. Both these outcomes would result in the “riveting” of slaves’ constraints.

In another contrast to Garrison, Douglass ultimately supports the government actors that enact emancipation despite their more morally ambiguous reasons. Among the abolitionists, Douglass is noted as one of few to support Lincoln’s endeavors as a politician. Delbanco quotes Douglass’ argument in favor of the politician: “Had [Lincoln] put the abolition of slavery before

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93 Delbanco, 6.
94 Schor, 32.
95 Delbanco, 7.
the salvation of the Union, he would have inevitably driven from a powerful class of the American people and rendered resistance to rebellion impossible... Measuring him by... a sentiment he was bound as a statesman to consult, he was swift, zealous, radical, and determined." In this speech, Douglass recognizes the political necessity for Lincoln — the statesman — to prioritize the Union over abolition despite his pursuit of both. Through this new lens that sees ethical results as possible within the political system, Douglass recognizes not only the ability but the necessity to work within less idealistic politics. Without acknowledging the country’s political system, protesters may lose their potential to actually produce results in their cause’s favor. Because Douglass could further separate himself from his allies’ absolutist moral pathways, he later saw that the current system may allow for this same potential of executing emancipation.

Douglass maintained a strong moral drive that questioned society’s values, even putting his freedom on the line in protesting slavery’s institution. He never faltered in his argument for immediate abolition, a view that was especially radical early in the movement’s timeline. He also opposed all colonization efforts, which he believed catered to the slaveowners’ desires. With his strong commitment to some notably radical means of emancipation, Douglass expressed moral standards that place him amid Weber’s ethic of ultimate ends. However, he consistently weighed his political actions’ potential consequences. As the goal he pursued became possible through the current system’s political processes, Douglass counterbalanced his absolutist morality with an ethic of responsibility by acknowledging the importance of consequentialist morality. Through

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96 Delbanco, 15-16.
97 As a runaway slave, Douglass could have been arrested and brought back to his last slavemaster. This was especially the case following the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law. Furthermore, as a black man, his risk of receiving violent reactions from pro-slavery citizens most certainly higher than for white abolitionists.
these qualities, Douglass’ politics find a balance that most other major abolitionists do not. While he maintains a strong ethical integrity and radical devotion for the cause, he recognizes the issue as above the self’s moral purity. He prioritizes consequences amid his search for more moral means in a manner that Garrison, Thoreau, Walker, and Garnet fail to deliver.

Through his balance between what we can think of as Weber’s two political ethics, his approach to political action easily surpasses Hawthorne’s unproductive skepticism. While Hawthorne critiques the archetypal abolitionist’s obsession with morality without offering a solution to systemic problems, Douglass pursues this moral change without falling victim to the abolitionist archetype’s major dangers. Douglass recognizes the same moral ambiguity in humanity that Hawthorne observes. He also does not glorify his own pursuit for abolition as virtuous. Most importantly, however, he undeviatingly assesses his political action based upon its potential consequences, averting Delbanco’s most urgent concern with the archetypal abolitionist.

Because of Douglass’ consistently positive impact on the ethical cause, Delbanco should have concluded “The Abolitionist Imagination” with Douglass as his historical hero. Delbanco obviously admires Frederick Douglass’ politics, often juxtaposing those he critiques with Douglass. His language offers an amicable tone to Douglass’ reason on multiple occasions. In this sense, he sees admirable political approaches amid the abolitionists — even if it is only in this one case. However, he does not return to Douglass’ role as an abolitionist past his historical descriptions and instead focuses upon the abolitionists’ less politically successful antagonist Hawthorne. By doing so, he cuts his discourse short of recognizing the possible political responsibility an abolitionist can follow. While his criticisms provide important insight into how
virtue-driven politics may falter, they do not examine how the protester may build from this awareness. Douglass may provide this positive guideline for ethical politics, and present a less tragic conclusion for the reader’s desire for significant systemic change. In many cases, Delbanco’s caution does highlight many problematic qualities within an abolitionist’s archetypal mindset. However, with Douglass’ practice of awareness and responsibility, radical, moral politics do not need to vanish as viable options within the political sphere.

**CONCLUSION**

These assessments of individual abolitionists bring some important nuances to Delbanco’s discussion and his implied Weberian ethics. Each abolitionist examined demonstrates the abolitionist archetype’s commitment to higher law, and their belief that societal norms are in some significant sense antagonistic to these moral laws. Every white abolitionist in this group also expresses the second archetypal characteristic: a self-centered perspective upon morality. In contrast, the black abolitionists discussed avoid this trait and instead emphasize the oppressed group’s immoral suffering. Regarding consequences, Thoreau appears the least concerned with consequentialist morality because of his obsession with the self’s moral heroism. Garrison, Walker, and Garnet all showcase more ambiguous applications of consequentialist morality, although they do lean more toward the ethic of ultimate ends. Emerson’s actual political action probably illustrates a decent equilibrium between the ethic of ultimate ends and the ethic of responsibility. Douglass exemplifies the most ideal balance between the two ethics out of this group, though, due to his sense of self-awareness and his own personal connection to the issue.
Delbanco’s skepticism toward the ethic of ultimate ends is reasonable, as these political actors do present problematic arguments that have the potential to negatively affect politics. Within a political culture that has embraced some of the qualities he finds disturbing, Delbanco’s criticism provides a counterargument to this acceptance by highlighting the weaknesses in Americans’ perception of their own history. Through this, he prompts the reader to scrutinize her own political philosophy and its reflection of her political culture’s bias. For Delbanco, political thinkers and actors should always aim to examine their own bias and weaknesses in terms of their political approach.

However, Delbanco fails to persuasively analyze the group on which he bases his argument. He lumps the non-violent Garrisonian approach with the black militants’ call for slave uprising. He places these methods in the same box that Thoreau’s political withdrawal and Emerson’s promotion of gradual and compensated emancipation occupies. Most importantly, he does not recognize Douglass’ ethical excellence in his conclusions despite his strong balance between Weber’s ethics. In his dismissal of the abolitionists as a group, his essay limits its own consideration of what productive and ethical political protesting is. In glorifying Hawthorne over Douglass, a racist who criticizes the abolitionists as much for their methods as for their belief in equality, Delbanco almost negates the idea that ethical protests can have a positive impact upon a political culture.

Douglass is the more likely champion of ethical protest politics. While possessing a similar awareness of both society’s and the self’s moral fallibility, he expresses the insight Delbanco lauds in Hawthorne through a lens that aims to change society for the better. He reminds the contemporary reader that responsible action is possible and does not have to dismiss
those who are suffering. The ethical for Douglass is not inherently separate from the practical.

By recognizing his strengths, the protester is not doomed to Hamlet’s tragic ending or Quixote’s futile quest. History provides the reader with her own realistic, successful model for political action challenging societal norms or political laws.

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