

A Statesman Divided?: Abraham Lincoln's Views on Race

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Introduction

Few presidents rival the reverential awe and profound mystique of Abraham Lincoln. The tenure of America's sixteenth president involved the preservation of its fractured union during the Civil War, the enactment of the historic Emancipation Proclamation, and the codified cure for slavery through the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment. Lincoln laid the foundation for these accomplishments in his statesmanship objectives and efforts to shape public sentiment through his conception of race in antebellum Illinois. Lincoln's racial views necessitate comprehensive examination yet often befuddle 21st century analysis, prompting the quandary: how does one make sense of Lincoln's views on race? Some mythologize Lincoln as a political and racial savior, a symbol of redemptively pure racial equality views in an otherwise stained chapter of American history. Others examine Lincoln's remarks through a 21st century lens, contrasting his views with contemporary sentiments and consequently brand the Great Emancipator as racist. These two limited approaches yield little beneficial analysis as the "imprecise umbrella" of racism's verbiage denotes nuance-less conclusions that unhelpfully divide this American statesman's views into unproductive dichotomies.¹ Consequently, an alternative approach is necessary.

Instead of pursuing premises of Lincoln's racial conceptions as either redemptive or bigoted, historical research is better suited to analyze Lincoln's views on race in conjunction with his goals as a statesman. Consequently, it is the contention of this paper that Abraham Lincoln's views on race are expressed in three major conceptions: whereupon slavery violates the foundation of free institutions, all men are created equal, and natural rights are distinguished from civil rights. These conceptions are fundamentally tethered and externally consistent with his objectives as statesman. Lincoln masterfully crafted his remarks to

¹ George M. Fredrickson, *Big Enough To Be Inconsistent: Abraham Lincoln Confronts Slavery and Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 41.

influence public sentiment towards his statesmanship objectives: defending the negro's natural rights, the negro's inclusion within the Declaration's standard maxim and arresting slavery's spread in the territories. Consequently, Abraham Lincoln's conceptions of race are analyzed within the fruitful context of his aforementioned statesmanship objectives.

What is the Nature of a Statesman?

A thorough evaluation of the nature of the statesman is central to an accurate understanding of Lincoln's perspectives on race. This understanding is cultivated through a utilization of Harry Jaffa's conceptions of the statesman's nature and role in shaping public sentiment. Lincoln acknowledged the power of public sentiment in his first debate with Stephen Douglas asserting "with public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed" but most importantly "he who moulds public sentiment, goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions."² The task of a statesman is to "know what is good or right . . . how much of that good is attainable" and to influence public sentiment to facilitate the act of securing "that much good but not abandon the attainable good" by "grasping for more."³ Simply put, the statesman understands the nature of the right, appreciates the extent of its potential implementation and influences public sentiment to execute the possible good without making it an enemy of perfection. As a result, statesmanship often precipitates a tension between the comprehensive expression of one's personal feelings or views and furthering one's objectives. Lincoln's letter to his closest friend, Joshua Speed, astutely illustrated this tension. Lincoln confessed to Speed that despite his hatred of seeing negroes "hunted down and caught, and carried back to their stripes and unrewarded toils . . . I bite my lip and keep quiet."⁴ Lincoln implicitly identified himself while imploring his slave-owning friend to "appreciate how much the great body of Northern people do crucify their feelings, in order to maintain their loyalty to the constitution and the Union."⁵ A statesman is not a self-interested politician bent on the immediate and comprehensive proliferation of their personal feelings or views. Rather,

² Abraham Lincoln, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858*, ed. Robert W. Johannsen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 64-65.

³ Harry V. Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Issues in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 371.

⁴ Abraham Lincoln, *Lincoln on Race & Slavery*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 79.

⁵ Abraham Lincoln, *Lincoln on Race & Slavery*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 79.

statesmanship requires wisdom and sacrifice in molding and furthering long-term and noble objectives.

For the sake of specificity, four explicit statesmanship criteria serve as the foundation of this paper's analysis.⁶ First, the statesman is judged as to the merit and worthiness of his objectives. Lincoln's objectives in defending the negro's natural rights and abstract equality within the Declaration's standard maxim, and arresting slavery's spread in the territories demonstrate the worthiness of his goals. Second, a statesman is assessed by how wisely he judges what is and what is not within his power. Lincoln appreciated his legal inability to eliminate slavery altogether and instead addressed slavery within the context of its spread into the territories. By doing so, Lincoln gained a platform that enabled him to sway public sentiment towards a moral repudiation of slavery and a re-adoption of America's standard maxim: the equality of man. Third, a statesman is judged on the means adopted to produce results.⁷ Lincoln employed his debates with Stephen A. Douglas and his own speeches to influence public sentiment towards securing his objectives and achieving results. Fourth, a statesman is evaluated on whether or not his actions or statements hinder the perfect attainment of his goals by himself or others if conditions in the future improve.⁸ Through linguistic precision, equivocation, and clever parsing, Lincoln masterfully constructed his public statements with a keen eye set towards the future possibility of perfect attainment of his objectives, unhindered by past remarks and actions.⁹ These characteristics serve as an appendix for the nature of a statesman and their reference through the subsequent sections facilitates this paper's objectives.

1. Slavery Violates the Foundation of Free Institutions

By the middle of the 19th century, the issue of slavery's expansion completely engulfed the national discourse as America's most heated, controversial and divisive political issue. The repeal of the Missouri Compromise and the enactment of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854 repudiated delicate attempts to balance slave and free power and caused a subsequent invasion of slavery's opponents and defenders into the territories. These territories became proxy battlegrounds of electoral skirmishes against the background of increasing sectional strife. Lincoln's conceptions of race cannot be unfettered from his moral and practical commitments on the issue of slavery. Consequently, Lincoln's opposition to the

⁶ Jaffa, *Crisis*, 370.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 370.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

spread of slavery is examined on three levels: addressing slavery philosophically, examining slavery practically and most importantly, evaluating Lincoln's conception of the negro in relationship to slavery. First, Lincoln utilized speeches and his debates with Douglas to denounce slavery philosophically within the expansion question, calling the "declared indifference" relating to its spread a "convert zeal of the spread of slavery" he "cannot but hate."¹⁰ Lincoln's distress over slavery's expansion stemmed philosophically from his abhorrence of the "monstrous injustice of slavery itself."¹¹ In his fifth joint debate with Stephen Douglas, Lincoln described himself as someone who "contemplate[s] slavery as a moral, social and political evil."¹² During his famous "House Divided" speech in Chicago, Illinois, Lincoln boldly professed that he had "always hated slavery... as much as any Abolitionist."¹³ In a private letter to Joshua Speed, Lincoln described seeing "ten or a dozen slaves, shackled together with irons" as a "continual torment to me."¹⁴ However, Lincoln's consistent denunciation of slavery's inherent and philosophical wrongness maintained a complicated relationship with his practical objectives.

Second, Lincoln examined slavery's practical existence through a decidedly less robust set of prescriptions than his philosophical rhetoric implies. Instead of translating his philosophical abhorrence of slavery into composite practical objectives, Lincoln called slavery a "moral, social and political evil" while simultaneously stating that he had "no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution in the States where it exists."¹⁵ In this way, Lincoln the statesman favored a reverence and deference to existing law over illegal and irrespective abolitionism. Lincoln first espoused his reverence for law as central to his statesmanship character twenty years prior while speaking at the Young Men's Lyceum in Springfield, Illinois. Lincoln warned that if laws are "continually despised and disregarded" and the rights of "persons and property, are held by no better tenure than the caprice of a mob" then the "alienation of their affection from the Government is the natural consequence."¹⁶ Since America is founded on the consent of the governed, held together by the peoples' affection for their government and guided by their public sentiments, disregarding law ultimately undermines the entire project. To "fortify against" this eventuality, Lincoln

¹⁰ Abraham Lincoln, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 50.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Abraham Lincoln, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 226.

¹³ Abraham Lincoln, *Lincoln on Race & Slavery*, 112.

¹⁴ Ibid. 79.

¹⁵ Abraham Lincoln, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 249

¹⁶ Abraham Lincoln, *Abraham Lincoln: A Documentary Portrait Through His Speeches And Writings*, ed. Don E. Fehrenbacher (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1977), 39.

beseached his fellow citizens to adopt a “political religion” that entailed a “reverence for the constitution and laws,” where one “swear[s] by the blood of the Revolution, never to violate in the least particular, the laws of the country; and never to tolerate their violation by others.”¹⁷ Lincoln appropriated this political religion into the foundation of his statesmanship disposition, necessitating his commitment that he had “no lawful right” to interfere with slavery despite his philosophical/moral opposition.¹⁸ In this way, Lincoln’s reverence for law, as foundational to the American experiment in self-government, tempered his philosophical objections to slavery. Instead, Lincoln espoused a series of non-interference commitments, where he “pledged to do nothing” about the interstate slave trade and remained opposed to an “unconditional repeal of the Fugitive Slave law” as the “Southern states are entitled to a Congressional Fugitive Slave law.”¹⁹ Simply put, Lincoln’s reverential fidelity to law necessitated moral restraint in the application of his philosophical views vis-à-vis slavery’s legal presence through his subsequent affirmation of its necessary legal protections.

Despite his deference to the rule of law where slavery already existed, Lincoln opposed slavery’s spread with unqualified vigor. Appropriating a moral reprimand of slavery’s extension, Lincoln unabashedly declared that he “shall oppose it as an evil so far as it seeks to spread itself” and will “insist on the policy that shall restrict it to its present limits.”²⁰ Lincoln saw the repeal of the Missouri Compromise as wrong practically, “in its direct effect [of] letting slavery into Kansas and Nebraska,” and philosophically, “allowing it to spread to every other part of the wide world, where men can be found inclined to take it.”²¹ To Lincoln, the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the *Dred Scott* verdict set America on a course towards the “perpetuity and nationalization of slavery” that violated the foundation of free institutions by insisting there is “no right principle of action but self-interest.”²² Further, Lincoln framed slavery’s spread as a rebuke of legal trajectories set in place by America’s Founders who put “the seal of legislation against [slavery’s] spread.”²³ Lincoln described the “seal of legislation” instituted by the Founders as their restriction of slavery from “new Territories where it had not gone” and the “abrogation of the slave trade.”²⁴ Recapturing the Founder’s “seal of legislation,” Lincoln asserted

¹⁷ Abraham Lincoln, *Documentary Portrait*, 39.

¹⁸ Abraham Lincoln, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 52.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 255.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

²² *Ibid.*, 51.

²³ *Ibid.*, 55.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

that by arresting its spread, slavery would then be placed “where Washington, and Jefferson, and Madison placed it, it would be in the course of ultimate extinction.”²⁵ In this way, Lincoln the statesman carefully balanced a deference to law that protected slavery where it existed while opposing its proliferation into the territories as a violation of America’s free institutions that “enable[d] the enemies of free institutions, with plausibility, to taunt us as hypocrites.”²⁶ By prudently molding public sentiment to adopt a moral objection to slavery’s spread, Lincoln sought to reinstitute the Founders’ legal trajectories as facilitating slavery’s eventual extinction.

Third, the subjugation of the negro, dehumanized and objectified through the “monstrous injustice of slavery” emboldened Lincoln’s abhorrence of the institution both philosophically and practically.²⁷ Lincoln’s conception of the negro’s dehumanization vis-à-vis the institution of slavery demonstrated his careful yet intentional attempts to influence public sentiment towards sentiments consistent with the Founders’ principles. While speaking in Peoria, Illinois, Lincoln argued that in the current legal context, “equal justice to the South” required him to not object “to you taking your slave” to Nebraska in the same way the southerner is not to “object to my taking my hog to Nebraska.”²⁸ Lincoln conceived this “equal justice” as “perfectly logical” if there “is no difference between hogs and Negroes.”²⁹ However, Lincoln implicitly admonished this argument’s invalidity by underscoring the presence of negro emancipation and the ever-present reality of the negro’s humanity.

Lincoln framed the intermittent reality of negro emancipation by certain slave owners as a fundamental rebuke of the logical consistency of their equivalency with the hog. Challenging this logic, Lincoln noted, “we do not see free horses or free cattle running at large,” yet there are negroes who are free but were “descendants of slaves, or have been slave themselves.”³⁰ Lincoln argued there is “something” that detained cattle and yet freed some negroes who “would be slaves now.”³¹ That “something” indicated recognition of the negro’s humanity, inducing white owners “at vast pecuniary sacrifices, to liberate them.”³² To Lincoln, the slave owner’s subtle recognition of the negro’s humanity is fueled by a “sense of justice and human sympathy” or a conviction that the “poor negro has

²⁵ Abraham Lincoln, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 54.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 50.

²⁸ Abraham Lincoln, *Lincoln on Race & Slavery*, 60.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 61.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Abraham Lincoln, *Lincoln on Race & Slavery*, 60.

some right to himself” and the subsequent emancipation invalidated their equivalency with the hog.³³

Further, Lincoln injected the negro into his discourse on self-government and centered his prospective humanity as tethered to the foundational query “whether a Negro is not or is a man.”³⁴ If the Negro is not a man, Lincoln posited that under self-government, it is acceptable for others to do “just as [they] please with him [the negro].”³⁵ However, if the negro is a man, Lincoln argued it is a “total destruction of self-government, to say that he too shall not govern himself.”³⁶ For if indeed the negro is a man, then “my ancient faith teaches me that ‘all men are created equal’” and “there can be no moral right in connection with one man’s making a slave of another.”³⁷ Lincoln argued that if a man “governs himself” it is self-government, but if “he governs another man” without his consent, that is “more than self-government—that is despotism.”³⁸ Consequently, the negro’s humanity, expressed by the sympathy-propelled emancipation of some and the wrongful despotism of many demonstrated slavery’s violation of self-government as a free institution. Given the negro’s humanity, Lincoln forcefully argued that slavery “undermin[ed] the principles of progress, and fatally violat[ed] the noblest political system the world ever saw.”³⁹ Further, Lincoln recognized that the legitimized spread of slavery depended on denying the negro’s humanity and silencing discourse on slavery’s morality/immorality.⁴⁰ Accordingly, the statesman sought to mold public sentiment towards the conclusion that the negro’s humanity rendered self-government morally substandard as long as slavery governed the negro without his consent.

Consequently, Lincoln’s sentiments struck at the heart of the slavery expansionist argument by advocating the recognition of the negro’s humanity and opposition to the immorality of slavery. In this way, Lincoln’s conceptions of race played an active role in furthering his statesmanship objectives. By influencing public sentiment to restrict slavery’s spread on moral grounds, maintain fidelity to the rule of law/Constitution and regard the negro as equally a man, the statesman aimed at constructing a political and legal environment that placed slavery on “the course of ultimate extinction.”⁴¹ Once extinct, slavery no longer governs negroes

³³ Abraham Lincoln, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 60.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

³⁵ Abraham Lincoln, *Lincoln on Race & Slavery*, 62.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Abraham Lincoln, *Documentary Portrait*, 77.

⁴⁰ Abraham Lincoln, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 305.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 311.

without their consent and subsequently ceases to violate the foundation of America's free institutions.

2. All Men Are Created Equal

The “ancient faith” Lincoln credited for teaching him “all men are created equal” is most notably expressed in a revolutionary document written nearly eighty-one years prior, the Declaration of Independence. To Lincoln, the “central idea” of America's political public opinion centered on the maxim “all men are created equal” and “are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”⁴² He consistently argued that until the *Dred Scott* decision three years prior, the accepted public sentiment centered upon the belief that the Founders “intended to include all men” within this central idea but the aforementioned ruling categorically refuted both the negro's humanity and any prospect of civic inclusion.⁴³ While refuting the *Dred Scott* decision and defending America's standard maxim, Lincoln utilized three denotations of equality in his careful navigation of the turbulent waters of the intersection of race and equality. These three denotations illustrate equality as an identity of abstract relations (abstract equality), identity of innate ability and identity of status.⁴⁴ Lincoln's conceptions of race are intermixed within these differentiations and tethered to his objectives as a statesman.

First, Lincoln described the maxim “all men are created equal” in the Declaration of Independence as signifying man's equality with one another in “abstract relations” or abstract equality.⁴⁵ Lincoln underscored the Founders' intention to not “declare all men equal in all respects” or to state that all men are “equal in color, size, intellect, moral developments, or social capacity.”⁴⁶ Instead, the Founders instituted a “tolerable distinctness” regarding the extent of the standard maxim.⁴⁷ However, Lincoln made no distinction of equality within abstract relations, as all men are equal in their right to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Stephen Douglas vehemently rejected Lincoln's conclusion and aggravated racial prejudices by asserting that anyone who included negroes with the Declaration's maxim did so because they “want[ed] to vote, and eat, and sleep, and marry Negroes.”⁴⁸ To Lincoln, Douglas's charge vexed “a natural disgust in

⁴² Abraham Lincoln, *Documentary Portrait*, 87.

⁴³ Abraham Lincoln, *Lincoln on Race & Slavery*, 96.

⁴⁴ Richard Striner, *Lincoln and Race* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012), 19.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Abraham Lincoln, *Lincoln On Race & Slavery*, 96.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 96.

the minds of nearly all white people” to the “idea of an indiscriminate amalgamation of the white and black races.”⁴⁹ Conversely, Lincoln boldly rejected Douglas’s charge as “counterfeit logic,” which stated “because I do not want a black woman for a slave I must necessarily want her for a wife.”⁵⁰ Instead, Lincoln conceptualized the negro woman as “in some respects she certainly is not my equal; but in her natural right to eat the bread she earns with her own hands without asking leave of anyone else, she is my equal, and the equal of all others.”⁵¹ Framing the imagery of earning and eating bread within the context of abstract relations/equality, Lincoln actualized the Declaration’s equality of rights to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” by appropriating them to the negro subject. As one of the most basic of human activities, Lincoln used this image to apply a rudimentary equivalence between the white and black races, and even the sexes. The negro’s tangible right to earn and eat bread disarmed the controversial verbiage of equality by illustrating an anecdote that instead cultivated white man’s sympathies vis-à-vis the negro’s humanity and right to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Lincoln the statesman consistently used this carefully crafted anecdote to urge public sentiment to apply the sympathies of their heart to a philosophical commitment in their minds by espousing “there is no reason in the world why the Negro is not entitled to all the rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence.”⁵² Equality in abstract relations or “abstract equality” also formed the foundation for Lincoln’s conceptions of “natural rights” and is a site of further discussion later in this paper. While ceding the negro as not his equal “in some respects,” Lincoln used this denotation to argue that abstract equality, the most foundational identity of equality, must be equally appropriated to white and black races alike.⁵³ In defending America’s standard maxim as inclusive of negroes, Lincoln employed the denotation of equality in abstract relations to urge public sentiment to fully appropriate the rights of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” to the negro.

Second, Lincoln charged that the maxim “all men are created equal” does not necessarily extend to equality of innate abilities, as the Founders utilized a “tolerable distinctness” by not intending “to declare all men equal in all respects.”⁵⁴ Compared to his conceptions of equality in abstract relations, Lincoln’s views regarding the intersection of race and equality of innate abilities are decidedly more nuanced and complicated. Echoing the language of the Declaration

⁴⁹ Ibid., 95.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 96.

⁵¹ Abraham Lincoln, *Lincoln on Race & Slavery*, 96.

⁵² Abraham Lincoln, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 249.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Abraham Lincoln, *Lincoln on Race & Slavery*, 96.

of not including “all men equal in all respects,” Lincoln argued in his speech in Springfield that the black woman “in some respects [...] is not my equal.”⁵⁵ Through precisely noncommittal language, Lincoln’s conception of the negro’s inequality entails no elaboration, clarification, or specificity as to the nature of the inequality. He refused to accredit her inequality to innate abilities, color or intellectual deficiencies and instead chose to express his conceptions of inequality through evasive language. Lincoln’s audience, antebellum Illinois voters, typically attributed the negro’s inequality to the innate abilities of an inferior race. By not elaborating on the nature of the “some respects,” Lincoln intentionally constructed his contributions to avoid aggravating the sentiments of his audience while simultaneously refusing to abdicate the negro’s inequality as an identity of innate abilities.

Lincoln’s refusal to overtly abdicate inequality to innate abilities is further argued and concurrently clarified in his sixth joint debate with Douglas. In Springfield, Illinois on June 26th, 1857, Lincoln stated that “in some respects [the negro woman] is not my equal” whereas on October 13th, 1858 in Quincy, Lincoln remarked that the negro is “not my equal in many respects, certainly not in color—perhaps not in intellectual and moral endowments.”⁵⁶ The additional clarification of “color” as a characteristic of the negro’s inequality indicated the effectiveness of Douglas’s charges of racial amalgamation. This addition highlighted the implicit dynamic where Lincoln recognized that because of prejudiced sentiments and Douglas’s charges, he had to carefully attribute “color” as indicative of the negro’s inequality in order to not disqualify himself as a racial amalgamator in the eyes of Illinois voters.⁵⁷ However, the use of “color” significantly differs from the frequent conception of the negro’s inequality as attributable to “race”; a common sentiment that held the negro race as inferior and “incompatible with self-government.”⁵⁸ In this way, Lincoln’s precise sentiments regarding the negro as “certainly not” his equal in color demonstrated a clever linguistic sidestep. While seeming to tacitly sanction racial inequities, Lincoln actually attributed inequality to color, pigmentation and skin tone instead of intrinsic racial inferiority.⁵⁹ Consequently, Lincoln the statesman appropriated intentionally precise language to avoid irritating prejudiced public sentiment, reject racial inequality and inferiority as an innate ability and instead illustrate the obvious inequity of pigmentation and skin tone.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Abraham Lincoln, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 249.

⁵⁷ George Fredrickson, *Big Enough To Be Inconsistent: Abraham Lincoln Confronts Slavery and Race*, 62.

⁵⁸ Stephen Douglas, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 196.

⁵⁹ Jaffa, *Crisis*, 384.

In addition to ceding inequality to conceptions of color, Lincoln appropriated noncommittal language regarding equality vis-à-vis other innate differences: intellectual and moral endowments. Lincoln described the negro as “certainly” not his equal in color and “perhaps not in intellectual and moral endowments.”⁶⁰ The intentional use of “perhaps” highlighted Lincoln’s linguist choices to use evasive and noncommittal language to avoid characterizing the negro as inherently unequal in “intellectual and moral endowments.”⁶¹ By doing so, Lincoln consistently refused to conceptualize the negro as irrecoverably and fundamentally his inferior in race, intellectual ability and moral abilities. However, this refusal to abdicate inequality to innate abilities stands in stark contrast to the views of other influential politicians. Republican Congressman Owen Lovejoy, a frequent figure in the abolition movement boldly proclaimed, “I know very well that the African race, as a race, is not equal to ours.”⁶² Republican Senator Henry Wilson also did not “believe in the equality of the African race, mentally or physically.”⁶³ In addition, Stephen Douglas, a Democrat, boldly proclaimed that because he is so inferior in intellect and morality “the negro is incompatible with self-government.”⁶⁴ Through substantive comparison to the unequivocal statements of Lovejoy, Wilson, and Douglas, the intentionality of Lincoln’s noncommittal language is clearly evident. While Douglas et. al unambiguously described the negro as intellectually and morally inferior and unequal to whites, Lincoln’s precise contributions illustrated his refusal to overtly regard the negro as inferior. This intentional linguist choice highlighted the difference in his statesmanship objectives in contrast to the demagoguery of his political counterparts. While the statements of Lovejoy, Wilson and Douglas aim at satisfying prejudiced public sentiments, Lincoln’s noncommittal language implicitly indicated the possibility of the irrationality of prejudice while furthering his statesmanship objectives. Lincoln the linguist strategist realized that if inequality is tethered to inferiority, his objectives to defend the negro’s natural rights are at risk, their inclusion within the standard maxim difficult and the spread of slavery legitimized. By refusing to overtly intertwine inequality of innate abilities with racial inferiority, Lincoln prudentially emphasized the negro’s humanity and equality as central in his objective to arrest the spread of slavery and aid its ultimate extinction.

Third, complimentary to his conceptualizations of equality as a denotation of innate abilities, Lincoln also utilized the description of equality as status to avoid irritating or aggravating prejudiced public sentiments while simultaneously urging

⁶⁰ Abraham Lincoln, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 249.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Richard Striner, *Lincoln And Race*, 19.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Stephen Douglas, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 196.

it towards conceptions that furthered his statesmanship objectives. Not unlike a ruler, identity of status refers to the measured present extent of equality's reach.⁶⁵ Lincoln utilized the identity of status to simply describe the present extent of abstract equality and relations while emphasizing that the Founders did not assert the "obvious untruth, that all [men] were then actually enjoying that equality" nor were they "about to confer it immediately upon them."⁶⁶ Douglas argued and the *Dred Scott* decision ruled against abstract relations and equality as inclusive of the negro because of the lack of demonstrable equality of status, stating that the Founders "did not at once, actually place them on an equality with the whites."⁶⁷ However, Lincoln argued that the standard maxim of "all men are created equal" reflects equality in abstract relations and the Founders meant to "declare the *right*, so that the *enforcement* of it might follow as fast as circumstances should permit."⁶⁸ To Lincoln, equality as an identity of status is emblematic of the enforcement and implementation of the Founders' standard maxim of "all men are created equal" in abstract relations. In fact, Thomas Jefferson acknowledged, after penning that standard maxim, that the "ground of liberty is to be gained by inches" and the conception of the identity of status served as a device to measure the extent of liberty and equality's enforcement and expression.⁶⁹

The conceptualization of equality as an identity of status is a useful philosophical tool and also served as a powerful linguistic and statesmanship instrument. During his speech in Springfield, Lincoln regarded the negro as "in some respects she is certainly not my equal."⁷⁰ In this way, Lincoln employed equality as an identity of status to describe the negro's inequality as not indicative of intrinsic inferiority but rather representational of the incomplete enforcement of the standard maxim. Utilizing the conception of equality as an identity of status is a frequent and consistent strategy of Lincoln's while he carefully waded through the controversial issue of racial equality. By simply highlighting the inequality of the negro, Lincoln "pa[id] lip service" to the common conceptions of white supremacy while actually making a simple observation about the incomplete enforcement of America's standard maxim.⁷¹ The denotation of equality allowed Lincoln to avoid aggravating the white supremacist sentiments of his audience while implicitly advocating the negro's inclusion within abstract relations/equality. In this way, the

⁶⁵ Richard Striner, *Lincoln And Race*, 19.

⁶⁶ Abraham Lincoln, *Lincoln on Race & Slavery*, 97.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 97.

⁶⁹ Richard Striner, *Lincoln and Race*, 17.

⁷⁰ Abraham Lincoln, *Lincoln on Race & Slavery*, 96.

⁷¹ George Fredrickson, *Big Enough To Be Inconsistent: Abraham Lincoln Confronts Slavery and Race*, 41.

precision of Lincoln's language allowed him to implicitly rebuke present inequality of abstract relations/equality and favor the negro's equality within the standard maxim. By advocating a full enforcement of the negro's equality in abstract relations and equality, Lincoln is able to defend the negro's natural rights and argue against the immorality of slavery's expansion. Consequently, Lincoln the statesman's use of precise, intentional and noncommittal diction allowed him to simultaneously defend "all men are created equal" as inclusive of the negro and use the denotations of equality as particularly appropriated in the furtherance of his objectives.

3. Distinction Between Natural and Civil Rights

Lincoln's perspectives on race within the context of slavery and the standard maxim of equality serve as a foundation for his most important philosophical and political differentiation within the context of race: the distinction between natural and civil rights. While under fire from Douglas for allegedly favoring an indiscriminate amalgamation of the white and black races, Lincoln's distinction between natural and civil rights serves as one of the richest areas to analyze his perspectives on race as tethered to his statesmanship objectives. In their first joint debate, the Senator from Illinois argued that Lincoln's opposition to both the *Dred Scott* decision and the Kansas-Nebraska Act demonstrated that "Mr. Lincoln and the Black Republican party... are in favor of the citizenship of the Negro."⁷² Throughout their second debate, Douglas framed their Senate race as a choice to either adopt or reject comprehensive racial equality, telling Illinois voters, "those of you who believe that the negro is your equal and ought to be on an equality with you socially, politically and legally, have a right to entertain those opinions, and of course will vote for Mr. Lincoln."⁷³ Simply put, the context where Lincoln made his precise distinction is defined by intense racial demagoguery and invocations of white supremacy. Carefully responding to charges of negro citizenship, political, and social equality, Lincoln emphatically stated "I have no purpose to introduce political and social equality between the white and black races" and "anything that argues me into his idea of perfect social and political equality with the negro, is but a specious and fantastic arrangement of words."⁷⁴ Making a critical distinction, Lincoln argued "there is no reason in the world why the negro is not entitled to all the natural rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence, the right to life,

⁷² Stephen Douglas, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 45.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁷⁴ Abraham Lincoln, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 52.

liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”⁷⁵ In this way, Lincoln distinguished between civil rights (citizenship, political and social equality) and natural rights (life, liberty and pursuit of happiness).

First, Lincoln distinguished natural rights as specifically enumerated within the Declaration of Independence. To Lincoln, natural rights of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” are entitled to negroes as well as whites.⁷⁶ Douglas vehemently disagreed, calling it a “monstrous heresy” to say that “[the] negro and the white man are made equal by the Declaration of Independence.”⁷⁷ Despite Douglas’s fervent opposition and the racially prejudiced views in antebellum Illinois, Lincoln boldly defended the negro’s natural rights, arguing that he is “as much entitled to these as the white man.”⁷⁸ Lincoln’s sentiment on the racial equality of natural rights ran against “deep-seated white racism” in Illinois that “clearly trumped the egalitarian principles of the Declaration.”⁷⁹ Lincoln the statesman followed his defense of the negro’s natural rights with the qualification that the negro “is not my equal in many respects” but furthered his argument by analogizing the negro as “my equal and the equal of Judge Douglas, and the equal of every living man” in his “right to eat the bread, without the leave of anybody else, which his own hand earns.”⁸⁰ In this way, Lincoln’s conception of abstract equality is further expressed in the natural rights that the Founders expressly enumerated in the Declaration. To Lincoln, the defense of America’s standard maxim (equality of man) also required a defense of natural rights. While denied under slavery, Lincoln argued that on its most rudimentary level, the natural rights of “life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness” entitled the negro to the product of their labor without interference or molestation.

However, Lincoln’s contemporaries in philosophy, sociology and science rejected any notion that espoused the racial equality of natural rights. Dr. Samuel Morton concluded in the 1840’s that the negro is the “inferior” of the white race after comparing “cranial capacities” of skulls.⁸¹ Dr. Josiah Nott published his book, *Types of Mankind*, founded on polygenism (races are separate species) in 1854, the same year as the Kansas-Nebraska Act.⁸² The predominant philosophy of the South found its influence in George Fitzhugh’s book, *Sociology for the South*, in its

⁷⁵ Ibid., 52.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 53.

⁷⁷ Stephen Douglas, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 215.

⁷⁸ Abraham Lincoln, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 53.

⁷⁹ George M. Fredrickson, *Big Enough To Be Inconsistent: Abraham Lincoln Confronts Slavery and Race*, 64.

⁸⁰ Abraham Lincoln, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 53.

⁸¹ Richard Striner, *Lincoln And Race*, 10.

⁸² Ibid.

argument that “some were born with saddles on their backs, and others booted and spurred to ride them, and the riding does them good.”⁸³ Lincoln the statesman emphatically rejected scientific racism as oppositional to the “abstract truth” within the Declaration.⁸⁴ In this way, Lincoln conceptualized the negro’s humanity as undermining the scientific arguments that helped legitimize slavery and its expansion. Consequently, he championed a defense of America’s standard maxim and enumerated natural rights as inclusive of the negro.

In this way, Lincoln understood the foundation of his statesmanship objectives as dependent on public sentiment’s acceptance of the negro’s natural rights. If public sentiment did not accept the negro’s natural rights, slavery was permissible, its extension into the territories logical, and its extinction impossible. Consequently, Lincoln the statesman carefully clothed the negro’s natural rights within America’s revered standard maxim that “all men are created equal” in order to shape public sentiment towards accepting and supporting the extension of the enumerated natural rights of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” to the negro. Simply put, the defense of the negro’s natural rights became the foundation of his statesmanship objectives as enabling him to favor the equality of man and actively oppose slavery’s spread.

Second, while authoritatively advocating the negro’s natural rights, Lincoln carefully distinguished civil rights and political and social equality from natural rights. Lincoln’s distinction is based on substance (natural rights vs. civil rights) but also on the applied rhetoric (unashamed fervor vs. cautious qualification). Douglas charged, “Mr. Lincoln and the Black Republican party... [as] in favor of citizenship of the Negro” while maintaining his own opposition to “negro citizenship in any and every form.”⁸⁵ In Ottawa, Lincoln responded by saying “anything that argues me into his idea of perfect social and political equality with the Negro, is but a specious and fantastic arrangement of words.”⁸⁶ Contrasted to his fervent support of the negro’s natural rights (“there is no reason in the world why the Negro is not entitled to all the rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence”) Lincoln’s first rejoinder is decidedly less vigorous⁸⁷. Rejecting citizenship language, Lincoln instead exaggerated Douglas’s conception of his purportedly favored equality as by nature “perfect”. In addition, Lincoln regarded the “physical difference” between the white and black races as “probably forever forbid[ding] their living together upon the footing of perfect equality.”⁸⁸ Lincoln

⁸³ Ibid., 5.

⁸⁴ Abraham Lincoln, *Documentary Portrait*, 121.

⁸⁵ Stephen Douglas, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 45.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 52.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 249.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 52.

implicitly attributed the forbiddance of “perfect equality” to prejudice, not racial inferiority by refusing to ascribe to the imperative superiority of whites.⁸⁹ In this way, Lincoln regarded perfect equality as impossible and contrary to the Founder’s disinclination to declare “all men equal in all respects.”⁹⁰ In effect, Lincoln reframed citizenship as “perfect” social and political equality as a qualifying rhetorical technique aimed at disarming racial backlash to his statesmanship objective through a hyperbolic conceptualization of equality.

However, pressure mounted on Lincoln to make more authoritative statements on civil rights and political and social equality as Douglas’s charges of racial amalgamation resonated within an electorate that revolted at negro citizenship and despised racial egalitarianism.⁹¹ In Charleston, Illinois, Lincoln gave his most outwardly forceful opposition to negro civil rights and social equality:

I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the equality of the white and black races—that I am not nor ever have been in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people; and I will say in addition to this that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality.⁹²

Compared to his statements in Ottawa, the intentional removal of the term of “perfect” equality underscored Lincoln’s implicit recognition of the effectiveness of Douglas’s racial amalgamation charges. Lincoln again tentatively equivocated on citizenship and instead addressed “social and political equality.” Additionally, Lincoln left negro citizenship overtly unaddressed and instead focused on specific aspects of citizenship and social relations. Despite the cleverness of his intentional citizenship vs. citizen attributes demarcation, Lincoln’s precise linguistic formulation of his lack of temporal opposition to social and political equality underscored the character of a statesman. The meticulously worded “I am not, nor ever have been” necessitated a lack of “favor” that extended only to the past and present. In doing so, Lincoln the statesman left himself the option to favor these attributes of social and political equality in the future. In order to understand Lincoln’s linguist precision and strategy accurately, it is important to remember

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Abraham Lincoln, *Lincoln on Race & Slavery*, 96.

⁹¹ George M. Fredrickson, *Big Enough To Be Inconsistent: Abraham Lincoln Confronts Slavery and Race*, 82.

⁹² Abraham Lincoln, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 162.

that his statesmanship objectives are not implicitly tethered to an overt defense of negro citizenship. Instead, it is more profitable to conceptualize the concept of negro citizenship as a consequential question if Lincoln's first objectives (restricting slavery's spread, favoring equality of man, negro's natural rights) are settled issues within public sentiment. However, if and when those objectives are settled, negro citizenship must be addressed. Lincoln recognized this reality by refusing to overtly restrict his lack of favoring social and political equality beyond the past and present. Proper evaluation of the statesman is whether or not his actions of statements "hinder the perfect attainment" of his goals by himself and others if conditions improve in the future.⁹³ In this way, Lincoln implicitly left the door open in the future for him to favor social and political equality (i.e. negro voters, negro jurors, elected officials, and interracial marriage) without hindering similar perspectives in others. As a result, despite operating in a highly prejudiced context, Lincoln's linguist precision constructed noncommittal statements that simultaneously maintained the integrity of his statesmanship objectives while not restricting his favoring of greater equality in the future.

While employing precise, noncommittal language regarding future political and social equality, Lincoln the statesman also addressed its complexities by implicitly questioning the rationality of racial prejudices. During his debate in Ottawa, Lincoln cited the "physical difference" between the white and black races as what will "probably forever forbid their living together upon the footing of perfect equality."⁹⁴ While "physical difference" is intentionally ambiguous, its foundation can be attributed to the prejudices within the white population elsewhere in the debates.⁹⁵ After rejecting the immediate execution of a colonization plan as an unrealistic remedy to the problem of "physical difference", Lincoln asked:

What next? Free them, and make them political and socially our equals? My own feelings will not admit of this; and if mine would, we well know that those of the great mass of white people will not. Whether this feeling accords with justice and sound judgment, is not the sole question, if, indeed, it is any part of it. A universal feeling, whether well or ill-founded, cannot be safely disregarded. We cannot, then, make them equals. It does seem to me that systems of gradual emancipation might be adopted.⁹⁶

⁹³ Jaffa, *Crisis*, 370.

⁹⁴ Abraham Lincoln, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 52.

⁹⁵ Jaffa, *Crisis*, 385.

⁹⁶ Abraham Lincoln, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 51.

Through his richly complicated remarks, Lincoln illustrated the inherent tension between personal convictions and public sentiment by recognizing the power of a “universal feeling.”⁹⁷ While a fierce defender of the negro’s natural rights, Lincoln demurred on the topic of making negroes “political and socially our equals” not on the basis of its morality or immorality, but through an ambiguous “feelings” equivocation, where Lincoln’s “own feelings will not admit of this.”⁹⁸ The precisely indistinct meaning of “admit to this” demonstrated Lincoln’s intentional reluctance to commit himself to views that regarded political and social equality as immoral. Further, Lincoln hypothesized that even if his “feelings” admit to instituting political and social equality for negroes, he recognized that the feelings of “the great mass of white people will not.”⁹⁹ In this way, Lincoln’s hypothetical accepted the power of public sentiment vis-à-vis the convictions or feelings of the statesman. This recognition provides invaluable insight as to how intentionally and thoughtfully Lincoln constructed his remarks as intermixing with the realities of public sentiment.

However, Lincoln does not limit his feelings hypothetical to an unquestioning deference to public sentiment, but rather questioned the underlying justice of that feeling (i.e. racial prejudice). By asking whether the feeling of racial prejudice, “accords with justice and sound judgment is not the question,” Lincoln rhetorically questioned their validity.¹⁰⁰ By doing so, Lincoln the statesman both respected public sentiment as something that “cannot be safely disregarded” but that its sentiments necessitated examination under the criteria of “justice and sound judgment.”¹⁰¹ In this way, Lincoln implicitly alluded to the statesman’s role in influencing public sentiment towards just sentiments by adopting his Temperance Address model where he argued that “when the conduct of men is designed to be influenced, persuasion, kind, unassuming persuasion should ever be adopted.”¹⁰² Through his gentle persuasion and qualified language in Ottawa, Lincoln sought to convince the “great mass of white people” that he was their “sincere friend.”¹⁰³ In doing so, Lincoln the statesman aimed to use the “drop of honey” of friendship to lead the public towards “the great high road of [their] reason” and thorough examination of the justice and sound judgment of their revulsions to negro political and social equality.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Abraham Lincoln, *Lincoln on Race & Slavery*, 14.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

Through intentionally kind and “unassuming persuasion,” Lincoln simultaneously honored the right of public sentiment while he implicitly urged it towards an examination of its justice. Given the obstacle of current public sentiment regarding political and social equality, Lincoln matter-of-factly concluded that “We cannot, then, make them equals” without specifying that equality as either wrong or immoral.¹⁰⁵ Consequently, acknowledging the limits of current public sentiment, Lincoln prudentially prescribed “systems of gradual emancipation” as something that “might be adopted.”¹⁰⁶ While the particulars of that “gradual emancipation” are not specified, Lincoln cautious favor of “gradual emancipation” indicated the very real possibility of his favor for political and social equality of the negro if conducive within public sentiment. But in this way, Lincoln illustrated that beyond his immediate statesmanship objectives (restricting slavery’s spread, favoring equality of man, negro’s natural rights), he “might” favor a gradual emancipation in concert with his prudential and wise nature. Lincoln’s cautious defense of gradual emancipation indicated his measured prescriptions and respect for public sentiment.¹⁰⁷

Consequently, Lincoln’s distinction between natural and civil rights is of irreplaceable importance in furthering his broad statesmanship objectives. Lincoln’s defense of the negro’s natural rights laid the foundation for all of his statesmanship objectives but required a differentiation from civil rights. Had Lincoln done more to “secure [civil] rights of Negroes,” openly advocated full negro citizenship and political/social equality, his objective to arrest the spread of slavery would be dismissed, its ultimate extinction at risk and his desire to favor the equality of man undermined.¹⁰⁸ Consequently, Lincoln crafted precise language regarding negro civil rights and political/social equality that did not restrict his future support, gently questioned the justice of certain public sentiments and kindly argued for gradual emancipation. In this way, Lincoln the careful statesman intentionally constructed his contributions to simultaneously respect public sentiment while empathizing the role of justice, sound judgment and prudence in navigating the intersection of race and civil rights. Simply put, Lincoln’s statesmanship protected the integrity of his current objectives, honored public sentiment and gently urged emancipation as a more just representation of the negro vis-à-vis political and social equality.

Conclusion

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Jaffa, *Crisis*, 377.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 372.

Abraham Lincoln acknowledged the power of public sentiment, insisting that “with public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed” and implicitly indicted his role as a statesman by remarking “he who moulds public sentiment, goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions.”¹⁰⁹ Lincoln implicitly recognized and externally influenced public sentiment towards his statesmanship objectives through the racial conceptions he espoused. The first task of a statesman is to “know what is good or right” and Lincoln’s adherence to the equality of man and his moral stance against the monstrous injustice of slavery demonstrates his commitment to the “right”.¹¹⁰ However, Lincoln’s distinctive statesmanship characteristic centered on his prudential ability to know “how much of that good is attainable.”¹¹¹ Consequently, based on an adherence to the rule of law and deference/understanding of public sentiment, Lincoln’s objectives found their manifestation in his moral appeals against slavery’s spread, advocacy of America’s standard maxim, and a forceful defense of the negro’s natural rights. In this way, Lincoln clearly understood “what is and what is not within his power” by planting and cultivating the seed of the negro’s natural rights and inclusion within the standard maxim.¹¹²

In this way, properly reading and analyzing Lincoln’s conceptions of race cannot simply revolve around comparing and contrasting his sentiments with mainstream 21st century racial views. Instead, rather than shallowly probing a “stock formula of words,” it is better to analyze the statesman’s sentiments as whether or not they demonstrate “fidelity to a cause.”¹¹³ In the case of Lincoln, his cause centered on defending the negro’s natural rights and their inclusion within America’s standard maxim as moral ammunition against the spread of slavery. This cause required molding public sentiment through carefully chosen words to persuade the public to adopt his conceptions and embrace his objectives. Consequently, Lincoln’s conceptions of race are neither theoretically abstract nor idealistic, but rather prudentially proactive and realistic. While some might regard his precision as the “trimming” of a carnal politician, Lincoln’s preeminent statesmanship emphasized devotion to abstract morality over political survival in conjunction with an adherence to existing law and fundamental respect for public sentiment.¹¹⁴ Simply put, Lincoln didn’t alter his rhetoric out of personal political

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 65.

¹¹⁰ Jaffa, *Crisis*, 371.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid., 368.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 366.

expediency, but instead prudentially crafted his language to respect current sentiment while urging it towards his just moral objectives.

While repudiating the Kansas-Nebraska Act as further sanctioning the despotism of the negro, Lincoln boldly proclaimed in Peoria that instead we should “allow ALL the governed an equal voice in the government, and that, and that only is self government.”¹¹⁵ Instead of obtusely broadcasting his principles irrespective of the political and (or) legal consequences, Lincoln prudentially constructed his subsequent contributions to facilitate the achievement of the “highest degree of equality for which general consent could be obtained.”¹¹⁶ Lincoln intentionally refused to make the perfect the enemy of the good or possible. In this way, Lincoln the statesman “crucified” an immediate and comprehensive expression of his slavery convictions in order to “maintain loyalty to the constitution.”¹¹⁷ He remained loyal and adhered to the laws of the Constitution in order to preserve the effective implementation of his statesmanship objectives.¹¹⁸ Defending the negro’s natural rights, their inclusion within the standard maxim and arresting the spread of slavery required the disciplined and prudential character of a statesman. Consequently, Lincoln’s conceptions of race are productive instruments that led the way towards greater equality, justice, and sound judgment without threatening the great experiment of American self-government. Thus, Abraham Lincoln is not a statesman divided but rather one united in resolve to further the great cause of equality.

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¹¹⁵ Abram Lincoln, *Documentary Portrait*, 76.

¹¹⁶ Jaffa, *Crisis*, 477.

¹¹⁷ Abraham Lincoln, *Lincoln on Race & Slavery*, 79.

¹¹⁸ Jaffa, *Crisis*, 377.

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