

The Subordination of Morality: Josiah Quincy and Duty at Harvard

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In May of 1838, Harvard University's Divinity School was planning to host a public debate on the topic of abolition. Invitations had been sent to Harvard undergraduates across the University, as well as to many outside the Harvard community. The public nature of the discussion was what prompted then President of Harvard, Josiah Quincy, to intervene. He wrote two letters to Dean of the Divinity School John G. Palfrey that month, one on May 25th and the other on May 28th. In the first letter, Quincy wrote two pages expressing concern about the debate and requesting that it be postponed. The second letter was only one page long and in it, he prohibited a public debate on abolition all together. In the early nineteenth century, with the Haitian Revolution ending in 1804 and Nat Turner's rebellion in 1831, many slave-owners feared slave revolts. This rising anxiety led to stronger pro-slavery sentiment in the South and greater repression of the rights of black people across the country. At the same time, both black and white abolitionists began to fight more vigorously for their movement.¹ In the decades leading up to the Civil War, Americans were forced to confront the topics of slavery and abolition on a national scale, and it was in this contentious and increasingly polarized context that the Divinity School's abolition debate was scheduled to take place. In his political life before and after he served as the University's president from 1829-1845, Quincy was a keen Federalist, and known to have spoken out against slavery.² However, Josiah Quincy's 1838 letters to the Divinity School ultimately reveal his prioritization of his public, professional duty as Harvard's president above any private, moral responsibilities he may have felt as an antislavery advocate.

In both of his letters, Josiah Quincy expresses great anxiety about the public's

¹Richard Newman, Patrick Rael, and Phillip Lapsansky, eds., *Pamphlets of Protest: An Anthology of Early African-American Protest Literature, 1790-1860* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 11-12.

²"Josiah Quincy," Harvard University, accessed October 19, 2018, <https://www.harvard.edu/about-harvard/harvard-glance/history-presidency/josiah-quincy>.

perception of the abolition discussion. In his first letter to the Divinity School, Quincy asserts, “Whatever may be your, or my private opinion, on the main question, I think there can be but one in the minds of prudent men, that, in the state of... excitability of the public mind on this topic abroad, it is desirable not to introduce it, obtrusively, into a seminary of learning, composed of young men, from every quarter of the country”.³ Quincy’s use of words and phrases such as “the public mind,” “abroad,” “obtrusively,” and “young men, from every quarter of the country,” within one sentence emphasize his fear of being too conspicuous in hosting a debate on a controversial topic. Public reputation evidently mattered more to him than “private opinion.” Additionally, twice in his first letter, Quincy uses the word “disturbance” when referring to possible public reactions to the discussion. He indicates that he would rather not *disturb* the public—particularly, he mentions, those “whose prejudices, passions, and interests are deeply implicated... by these discussions and who feel very naturally and strongly on the subject,” or in other words, those who support slavery—than discuss the freedom of black people in the country. Moreover, his categorization of a debate on abolition as a “disturbance” is, itself, disturbing; he refers to abolition as if it were a mere nuisance, rather than an essential human rights issue. As such, beneath the layers of rhetoric surrounding public image, Quincy subtly delegitimizes and belittles abolitionism itself.

Quincy’s concern with public opinion was likely due to the pragmatic lens through which he viewed his predicament. Within his two letters, he repeatedly uses some version of the words “prudence” and “wisdom”. He believes that, “in the minds of prudent men,” the abolition debate would be a bad idea. He also insists that the debate be postponed “until time is given to consider the wisdom and prudence” of it. In his second

³Josiah Quincy to John G. Palfrey, May 25, 1838, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

letter, he worries that inviting people “who are not members of [the] school” to attend and participate in the debate would not be “advantageous, nor wise, nor safe.”⁴

Supposedly, he means the discussion would not be advantageous, wise, or safe *for the University*. Quincy was thinking ahead, being “prudent” and “wise” in foreseeing the potential reactions of donors, students’ families, or anyone other important people to Harvard who were slave-supporters. He was clearly thinking about practicality over morality when making his decision to prohibit the debate.

Ultimately, Quincy’s pragmatic prioritization of the University’s public image appears to stem from his sense of professional duty. In his first letter, he declares, “I deem it, therefore, my duty” to inform Palfrey of his apprehensions surrounding the abolition debate. Later in the same letter, he asserts, “From a sense of duty, I have given you this information with a request that you would... take early measures, to [cause] the discussion to be postponed.” In his second letter, Quincy repeats the phrase, “I deem it, therefore, my duty” when prohibiting any public discussion at the Divinity School on abolition. By “duty,” Quincy certainly does not mean moral duty. The best inference one can make is that he refers to professional duty; as the head of an educational institution, he must look out for its best interests, which can involve putting aside his personal sentiments. The pragmatism and foresight that Quincy employed in worrying about Harvard’s reputation was likely in service of a larger goal to ensure the institution’s growth, success, and standing in the nation. What makes a good president is not necessarily what makes a good person, and Josiah Quincy seemed to care more about being the former than being the latter.

The circumstances of the time period help explain why Quincy determined that a

⁴Josiah Quincy to John G. Palfrey, May 28, 1838, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

discussion on abolition would not be in the University's best interests. Between 1800 and 1850, Harvard's assets increased five hundred percent and private donations became ninety-two percent of all contributions.⁵ In those fifty years, five of the twenty-five individuals who made significant donations to the University profited in some way from slavery. Much of the money from those five personal donations, which, when combined, constituted over fifty percent of the total private contributions, was likely the stolen fruit of slavery.⁶ These donations were largely what enabled Harvard to expand its resources and take the lead as the premier institution of higher education in the nation.⁷ As the University's status and prestige was dramatically improving, Quincy would not be doing his job if he dared to tarnish it. If donors had come to believe that Harvard was, in some way, supportive of abolition, especially given the greater national context of anxiety, it is very possible that Harvard would not be known as one of the best universities in the world today. Additionally, Harvard's relationship with slavery extended beyond receiving donations; Southern students, many of whose families held slaves, were largely incorporated into the student body and social environment.⁸ Surely, it would hurt the school if Southern families were to stop sending their children to Harvard, thereby decreasing enrollment. Quincy had far-reaching implications to consider when making decisions as president. He likely felt obliged to present to the country an "advantageous" image of the school in order to protect its growing resources and image.

While Quincy's letters display his sense of duty to construct a profitable public image for Harvard, they do not entirely confirm who Quincy was, privately. In his first

⁵Sven Beckert and Katherine Stevens, *Harvard and Slavery: Seeking a Forgotten History* (Cambridge, MA, 2011), 16.

⁶Sven Beckert and Katherine Stevens, *Harvard and Slavery: Seeking a Forgotten History* (Cambridge, MA, 2011), 17.

⁷Sven Beckert and Katherine Stevens, *Harvard and Slavery: Seeking a Forgotten History* (Cambridge, MA, 2011), 16.

⁸Sven Beckert and Katherine Stevens, *Harvard and Slavery: Seeking a Forgotten History* (Cambridge, MA, 2011), 18.

letter, he made a point of putting his private opinion on abolition aside, but what exactly was his private opinion? Did he feel morally conflicted when prohibiting the debate? One hint at Quincy's private opinion is found in his placement of quotation marks around the word "abolition" at the outset of his first letter, demonstrating an unwillingness to acknowledge the legitimacy or weight of the subject. Quincy's 1856 "Address Illustrative of The Nature and Power of Slave States and the Duties of Free States," delivered to the residents of Quincy, Massachusetts, confirmed that the man cared little for the abolitionist movement. In it, he declares, "Though sympathizing in feeling with Free Soldiers and Abolitionists, I have never concurred in the measures of either. My heart has been always much more affected by the slavery to which the Free States have been subjected, than with that of the negro."⁹ Since Quincy delivered this address after his presidency at Harvard, he would not have had the same obligation to watch what he said for the sake of the University; he was free to speak his mind on abolition. Yet, he publicly states that he does not truly support the cause of abolitionists and that he has always cared more about the political "slavery"¹⁰ of white Northerners than the physical slavery of black people. He does point out that he "sympathize[es] in feeling" with abolitionists, indicating some moral awareness. In order to sympathize, his heart must have been touched in some way. He must have acknowledged that there was at least some pain, hardship, and even injustice in slavery. This acknowledgement makes it all the more deplorable when he goes on to subordinate his conscience to his political agenda, directly

⁹Josiah Quincy, "Address Illustrative of The Nature and Power of the Slave States, and The Duties of The Free States" (address, Massachusetts, Quincy, June 1856, 5), accessed October 18, 2018, <https://babel.hathitrust.org>.

¹⁰In his 1856 address, Quincy declared that, due to Southern slavery, "compromises have been validated, the ballot-boxes broken, the votes of freemen destroyed... If this tissue of events do not rouse the Free States to united and concentrated action, nothing will. Their destinies are fixed. They are doomed slaves. Their liberties are gone, their Constitution gone. Nothing is left to them but to yoke in with the negro, and take the lash, submissively, at the caprice of their masters." His mention of the ballot-boxes and the votes of free, presumably white men suggests he was wary of the power Southern states gained through slavery, particularly when it came to political representation.

setting up his next sentence as a comparison of his values. Quincy's refusal to let the plight of black Americans occupy a substantial amount of space in his heart and mind was consistent with his subtle mockery of abolition in his 1838 letters. Further, Quincy's 1856 address attests to his sense of political duty as a staunch denouncer of the Slave Power Conspiracy. Even after he left Harvard, his sense of moral duty was still subsidiary to other commitments.

Biographical representations of Quincy depict him as more of an ardent abolitionist than his 1838 letters and 1856 Address suggest he was. For example, a quick Google search of the Josiah Quincy statue in Boston yields a webpage on the site, celebrateboston.com, which the common tourist could easily stumble upon. The page describes the statue honoring Quincy at Old City Hall and proceeds to praise Quincy's "great long term vision for [the] city," as well as list his many accomplishments as mayor of Boston 1823 to 1828.¹¹ The authors of the page then claim that Quincy was "one of the first to denounce slavery," which only adds to their glowing appraisal of the man and implies his virtuousness, yet entirely neglects the fact that he denounced slavery out of political, not moral concern.¹² Similarly, the Harvard Square Library's biography of Josiah Quincy describes him as a "firm supporter of Abraham Lincoln" and claims that "abolitionist politics drew [him] into the antislavery movement,"¹³ suggesting his support of abolition. Further, Harvard University's own presidential biography of Quincy leaves his stance on slavery out entirely. The biography critiques Quincy's inability to deal with student riots during his presidency yet makes no mention of the other stains on his

¹¹"Josiah Quincy Statue," Celebrate Boston, accessed October 19, 2018, <http://www.celebrateboston.com/statue/josiah-quincy-statue.htm>.

¹²"Josiah Quincy Statue," Celebrate Boston, accessed October 19, 2018, <http://www.celebrateboston.com/statue/josiah-quincy-statue.htm>.

¹³"Josiah Quincy," (1772-1864)," Harvard Square Library. March 08, 2017, accessed October 19, 2018, <http://www.harvardsquarelibrary.org/biographies/josiah-quincy>.

presidential record, such as his prohibition of the abolition debate in 1838 or his acceptance of donor money from slavery.¹⁴ Silence is a stance, and sometimes what is not said can speak just as loudly as what is. In either depicting a glorified image of Quincy or omitting his greatest moral flaws, these biographies are strikingly inconsistent with the assessment, based on his letters and address, that the man was not the most morally upright character.

As evidenced by his letters to the Divinity School in 1838, Josiah Quincy prioritized his professional duty to safeguard Harvard's image above any other responsibilities he may have had, moral or political. His approach to solving problems was pragmatic, not moralistic; status and money came before justice. This seems far too often to be the case in the history of American slavery; something else always came first, above freedom. The very Declaration of Independence, on which the country was founded, under prioritized freedom; Jefferson's first draft abolished slavery but ultimately, it was more important to him and the other founding fathers to present a united front against Britain than to put an end to one of the greatest crimes against humanity. Furthermore, the way any community remembers its past is of critical importance. How we remember Josiah Quincy today is particularly essential, considering the buildings, areas, and statue erected in his honor in Massachusetts; his name easily finds its way into daily life, uttered from the lips of everyone from Harvard students to tourists to native Bostonians. While Quincy may have positively contributed to Boston as its mayor, we cannot forget or ignore the action he took in 1838, however seemingly small. His decision to prohibit a public debate on abolition reflected a larger, long-standing practice of putting the freedom of black people aside and focusing on other,

¹⁴"Josiah Quincy," Harvard University, accessed October 19, 2018, <https://www.harvard.edu/about-harvard/harvard-glance/history-presidency/josiah-quincy>.

“more important” charges. To learn from history, we must look back on it with brutal honesty. Although we cannot discern from Quincy’s 1838 letters the degree to which his beliefs, values, and priorities changed throughout his life and career, we do know that he subordinated his moral duties to his professional responsibilities as President of Harvard. Hopefully, as we move forward, as individuals and as a country, we can learn from Josiah Quincy to never overlook justice when deciding where our priorities lie.

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