

Evaluating Historical Figures Through a Contemporary Lens

In the last decade, Thomas Jefferson's reputation has seen a sharp decline. He has been repeatedly denounced on the Internet by certain leading influencers, and his statues in public spaces, such as parks and college campuses, have been vandalized. Moreover, he is portrayed in an increasingly negative light in many academic institutions. Driving this wave of criticism are his perceived moral defects: Jefferson owned hundreds of slaves on his family plantation and never freed most of them, even as he condemned slavery in public and drafted a plan for gradual emancipation at the national level.

This issue reflects an ongoing debate about how contemporary society should judge historical figures. On the one hand, some claim that men like Jefferson had such reprehensible and moral defects – enslaving people, for instance -- that they should never be celebrated. Asked whether it is inherently fair to judge historical figures according to modern standards of morality, some argue that certain offences are so flagrant and morally objectionable that they should never be excused and cannot be outweighed by other achievements. Even a person raised to believe owning slaves is perfectly normal, for instance, has a clear duty to choose the right path forward for himself. To fail to recognize and follow that duty is unpardonable.

On the other hand, others argue that we should strive to understand historical figures in the appropriate context. Jefferson, for example, spoke out against slavery on many occasions. This may seem like moral hypocrisy, but some claim that we need to understand that by freeing his slaves, Jefferson would have condemned his family and himself to abject poverty. Individuals like Jefferson were simply imperfect, not evil, and imperfect people can still make great social contributions. Jefferson should be celebrated for what he did contribute: writing the Declaration of Independence and helping to lead the new United States through the post-Revolutionary period.

Discussion Questions

1. Is it ever reasonable to judge historical figures by contemporary moral standards? Always reasonable?
2. Can people be celebrated as champions of values such as liberty and equality when they did not live up to those ideals in their personal lives?
3. To what extent are people bound to the conditions of the time in which they live?