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Do You Really Think Black Lives Matter as Much as White Ones?

Here's a test to show how many white folks don't — perhaps not even you


 **Tim Wise** 2 days ago · 7 min read ★



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Even those who detest Black Lives Matter (as in, the movement) will typically agree that Black lives *themselves* matter. Well, at least to the extent “all lives” do — a point about which they like to remind us (as if rhetorically emphasizing the lives of those typically left out of the concept of “all” amounted to unjust preferencing).

Yes, Black lives matter, they insist. And if you asked if they believed Black lives were every bit as valuable as those of whites, all but the most Nazified among them would answer in the affirmative.

But they’re lying. And not just the right-wing types who most detest BLM, but even many white liberals who proclaim their belief in the value of Black life loudly and proudly. I doubt seriously that even most of *them* genuinely believe in the equal worth of Black humanity.

It’s an audacious statement, I know. But there’s a little test — or perhaps a thought experiment — one can indulge to demonstrate it.

The test has only a few questions. Here’s the first:

If tens of thousands of enslaved Black persons in the colonies of what became the United States — or the country itself, after its founding — had killed their enslavers in their sleep in a mass purge against the system of enslavement, would they have been morally justified in doing so?

Do you hesitate — do you flinch *even the slightest bit* — before answering yes to the question? Because if you do (and surely if your answer was no), you don’t believe Black life is equal to that of whites. Because if you did, you would endorse the morality of such a scenario without missing a beat.

And yes, I can hear the cries of protest because when I’ve raised this scenario before in workshops and discussions with white folks, I’ve seen

and heard the resistance. Tim, they say, it's only natural to hesitate before issuing a full-throated moral endorsement of taking human life. But is it?

Let's change the scenario. Imagine we were talking not about enslavers and those they held in bondage against their will. Instead, let's pretend we were discussing Ariel Castro and the three young women he kidnapped in Ohio between 2002 and 2004 and whom he held against *their* will until 2013 when one of his victims managed to escape and alert authorities.

And imagine that instead of one of those victims escaping and alerting police to Castro's actions, she had, instead, opted for violence to secure their freedom. Now, answer the second question on the test:

If, at some point in their captivity, one of the women kidnapped by Ariel Castro had killed him in his sleep to ensure her escape and that of the two other women held in bondage, would she have been morally justified in doing so?

I cannot imagine anyone answering this question in the negative or even hesitating to answer it affirmatively. Neither can I fathom any prosecutor who would seek to incarcerate such a woman in that scenario, or any jury that would have convicted her had a D.A. been so foolish. When a person has been kidnapped, they are morally entitled to use whatever means are at their disposal to secure their freedom. They are not required to start with a well-worded letter of protest to their kidnapper, followed perhaps by a sit-in. Nonviolent civil disobedience is not required of them. Their right to be free — and to get free by any means necessary — is absolute.

That we would all instinctively recognize this with Castro's kidnapping victims but that many would hesitate even slightly in the case of enslaved Black persons tells us all we need to know about how Black lives register on a hierarchy of value. After all, they too were kidnapped and held against their will. And no, before you say it, it doesn't matter that some enslaved

persons were initially sold into bondage by other Black folks in Africa. Because if those three women had been given against their will to Ariel Castro by their parents in exchange for meth, their captivity would have been no less unjustifiable.

Now I suppose you could argue that if Castro had kidnapped three Black women, you would be just as quick to endorse their right to violently end his life as you were in the actual case, in which his victims had been white. As such, you might insist, you *do* value Black lives just as much as white lives, when the scenarios are strictly comparable.

Fair enough. But what that still leaves as a pretty glaring problem is your inability to consider the enslavement of millions of people over 250 years equal in horror to a random kidnapping. It suggests you consider the latter more horrific and deserving of a violent response. And when it comes to the value of life placed upon those captured relative to those who held them, it demonstrates your prioritization of the the latter over the former.

So the next question is: *why?*

I can imagine one answer: Perhaps it's because you know some of those kidnappers are currently featured on your Ancestry.com wall? And if the enslaved had done what they were *morally entitled to do* — killing your ancestor before they could parent the child who would parent the child, ad infinitum, all the way down to the parent who would parent *you* — you would not be here. Which is to say, you may well owe your very existence to the restraint of Black people.

And to admit that, to acknowledge how dependent you are on Black people for your mere presence on Earth, would be to invert the worldview given to us as Americans. You know the drill: that they are dependent on us, that they were provided civilization by us, Christianity by us, opportunity by us,

freedom (eventually) by us. Please. If you descend from persons who held Black people in bondage, you likely owe every breath from your body to *them*.

To their forbearance.

Which is why it's especially funny to hear so many whites speak of how much we fear Black people and Black crime and Black violence and looting and rioting. It is precisely the *non-violence* of Black people, even when that violence would have been eminently justifiable — righteous even — that allows many of us to be carbon-based life forms capable of spouting such bullshit.

And if you are one of those white folks who have no such enslavers in **your** family tree, your unwillingness to endorse the scenario in the thought experiment is even worse. At least it would make some sense for a descendant of enslavers to flinch when asked the question if simply for the realization of what the actions portended by the experiment would have meant for them. But if you indeed come from a family that, as we love to say, “never owned slaves,” then why the hell would the scenario give *you* pause? And once again, we know.

Because at the end of the day, you can't really bring yourself to acknowledge the horror of enslavement. At some level, you still buy the hagiographic version of that system brought to you by many a plantation tour and propagandists for Southern gentility. You still refuse to believe it was that bad to be bought, sold, raped, bred, and trafficked for multiple generations — not even as bad as, say, being terrorized and brutalized by a singular kidnapper for a decade in Cleveland.

This is why when Black folks suggest an equivalence between the Confederate and Nazi flags, most whites flinch. When we argue that

plantations were forced labor camps, no less so than Dachau, most whites flinch. When we speak of the Middle Passage as a Holocaust, most whites flinch and insist that genocide requires — as with the Nazis, but unlike with enslavement — deliberate extermination of a group, even though no definition of genocide actually carries that requirement.

By its actions, this nation has forced us to either acknowledge the rot at the base of the tree known as America or ignore it, downplay it, minimize it, or stifle all conversation of it, as with the current attacks on Critical Race Theory. And so, we can't admit certain obvious moral truths, even though they are incontestable. To wit:

Thomas Jefferson deserved to be killed by those he enslaved.

So did George Washington.

And later, Andrew Jackson.

If morality had carried the day, South Carolina — the absolutely slaviest of slave states — would have been a killing field in which the bodies of white kidnappers and human traffickers would have littered the plantations of the entire state (and colony before statehood).

Does it bother you to hear me say that?

Why? How is it remotely debatable?

It isn't, at least not if you believe Black life is equal to white life. Because if you thought it was, you would recognize the absolute right of those Black lives to secure their freedom against the tyrants who denied it to them.

Oh, and not just the tyrants but *their entire families*, including the children.

Because if all a rebellious enslaved person did was kill the so-called master of the house, leaving the wife and children alive, to whom would the other non-rebelling enslaved persons pass by inheritance?

Ah yes, see? The entire family was implicated, and thus, practically speaking, it would have been necessary for them to have faced the same fate as those who cracked the whip — and no less moral if they did so. Only by their complete extirpation could a rebelling victim of enslavement secure freedom for themselves and the others held against their will.

All of which means we should have fewer statues of the founding fathers and more (or at least *one*) for those who launched the Stono Rebellion and several for Nat Turner. But when debate in Virginia commenced a few years ago about a statue for Turner, the fact that he killed “innocent” people was seen by most whites as disqualifying.

Because to them, Turner’s women and child victims were innocent.

Innocent: in ways that Andrew Jackson’s women and child victims *were not*.

Or Jefferson’s. Or Washington’s.

Innocent: in ways that the women and children enslaved in Southampton County, whom Turner was hoping to free, *were not*.

Because when they say all lives matter, they don’t mean it.

They have never meant it.

And there’s a good chance that even *you* don’t mean it now.

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