

## The Iron Man

(Why human worth is not inherent)

by Robert A. Monzingo (Member, PUC)

John C. Calhoun was a U.S. Vice President under both John Q. Adams and Andrew Jackson, a Secretary of State and a Secretary of War, a Senator, and a Congressman, making him one of the most important and influential Unitarians of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. While he was V.P. under John Q., the executive branch of the government was entirely in the hands of Unitarians -- the only time in U.S. history this was the case. He was also a founding member of All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington D.C., which remains to this day a flagship church in the denomination. He died in 1850, on the eve of the Civil War which he greatly assisted in precipitating. His nickname, “The Iron Man”, was earned as a result of his implacable defiance to compromise on the issue of slavery, which he championed as a positive good. “I hold concession or compromise [on slavery] to be fatal. If we concede one inch – compromise would follow compromise until resistance becomes impossible.” Since Calhoun was both a Unitarian and a champion of slavery, it is tempting to simply dismiss him as a hypocrite, but the unfortunate truth is he was not a hypocrite. He is a more formidable opponent than a mere hypocrite, and a more complex personality than he is usually given credit for. Although it may be distasteful, it is nevertheless worthwhile to consider Calhoun on his own ground and determine what reason and judgment can be brought to bear against the positions he represented.

His arguments for slavery rested on two pillars – the inherent worth of every person and the legitimacy of making blanket judgments. Let’s consider for a moment the logic behind these positions. The word “inherent” means (according to the dictionary) a “permanent and inseparable property” of an object. For example, the color yellow is an inherent property of

gold. An inherent property is a constant – immutable and fixed-- and there is nothing you can do to change it. This definition only addresses the existence of a property and says nothing about the degree or quantity of the property that is present -- only that it is present, and this fact provided a critical opening for Calhoun on which he was quick to capitalize. This shortcoming exposes a hidden vice that the idea of inherency carries. We shall see that it provides a convenient justification for dividing humanity into two classes – the civilized and the uncivilized.

Calhoun was convinced that his slaves had worth – he knew from the prices at slave auctions that his slaves were one his principal sources of wealth. Likewise, he was convinced of the inherent worth of slaves because he believed their worth was a permanent, inseparable, and fixed quality of their existence. For Calhoun this meant that African-Americans had enough worth to rise to the level of a barbaric tribal society, but could rise no farther. The popularity of inherent worth and its easy accommodation of the dual level model of worth pose a continuing threat that should not be underestimated. The late justice Scalia subscribed to Calhoun’s view of worth when he said: “There are those who contend that it does not benefit African-Americans to put them into the University of Texas, where they do not do well, as opposed to having them go to a less advanced school, a slower-track school where they do well.”

People who say they believe that human nature (or some aspect thereof), is a fixed constant, frequently have thoughts lurking in the back of their minds that perhaps this really isn’t the case. So it was with Calhoun. Uneasy with the idea that anyone was doomed to remain locked in the chains of inherency forever, Calhoun provided a convenient escape hatch: if they were fortunate enough to come under the tender loving tutelage of a slave-master, then things could turn out differently.

Calhoun likewise believed that making blanket judgments was a perfectly legitimate exercise. He approved the Calvinist proposition that man was inherently evil, although as a Unitarian he also believed that he was one of those “who was too good to be damned.” The people who framed the 1<sup>st</sup> UU Principle (the inherent worth and dignity of every person) were determined to fight the Calvinist idea that we are inherently evil and unworthy, and simply adopted language stating the opposite of the Calvinist proposition, without considering that the ideas of inherent good and inherent evil are Siamese twins sharing a common root – the idea that making a blanket judgment is a legitimate enterprise. As UU’s we should stand foursquare for the proposition of making reasoned judgments – a core UU value. Blanket judgments should be condemned as illegitimate because they are made automatically, only satisfying the bias held by those making the assessment.

The phrase “inherent worth and dignity of every person” appears in the Charter of the United Nations as well as in the Humanist Manifesto. With such a distinguished pedigree, the committee that drafted the principles and purposes adopted by the UUA in 1985 simply cut and pasted the phrase intact into their final report without taking the trouble to think through the implications of what they were doing. There is a popular misconception concerning the words “inherent” and “potential”. A pivotal figure in the formulation of the 1<sup>st</sup> Principle is Rev. Walter Royal Jones, who chaired the committee that drafted the principles and purposes, and wrote that “the term ‘inherent’ was chosen to make clear that worth and dignity are potentials that are part . . . of the human condition.” Here we find the word “inherent” conflated with the word “potential” as though the two words have the same meaning, which they do not. Amazingly Jones, a champion of inherency, also wrote, “We have two potentials, and our responsibility as religious liberals is to lean on the scale on the side of compassion and mutual helpfulness.” This

second statement is exactly right, and omits the word “inherent” entirely, but unfortunately the term still lingers on like an unwanted relative who refuses to leave, or like the fragrant perfume of a skunk. Not only is the second statement correct, it also disavows inherency by acknowledging that we can “lean on the scale” to help influence the course our potentials will take. It is correct to speak of inherent potentials, but to claim that some other property is inherent (like worth and dignity or unworthiness and evil) is both illegitimate and dangerously wrong.

Paul Razor, who is the director of the Religion and Social Issues Forum at Pendle Hill, a Quaker study center, says “religious liberals have historically failed to acknowledge that there is also an inherent potential for evil in human beings. Having no theology of evil has weakened our prophetic voice in trying to resist it.”

Calhoun was not the only religious liberal who failed to measure up to the implications of what it means to be committed to the potential of human worth. Thomas Jefferson had a lucrative nail factory at Monticello which was operated by young slave boys aged 8 thru 12. Apparently he was embarrassed by his use of slaves, for he was careful to place the factory far from the main house where it would remain hidden from visitors’ eyes. Nevertheless, Jefferson was sensitive to the charge that he was cruel: that’s why he gave strict orders that the slave boys were to be whipped only on Fridays, so they would continue to work hard.

There is one aspect of inherent worth and dignity that I hesitate to discuss; yet it is an element that greatly assists in making the idea so popular. This is the element of self-flattery. I have heard speakers who boasted of their own inherent worth and dignity, claiming that deeds have no impact on a person’s worth. Such a claim absurdly makes John Wilkes Booth equally worthy as Abraham Lincoln, and makes the concept of worth useless in determining who is a

threat and who is an asset to society. Such boasts run counter to a test proposed by Starr King, who claimed that the Unitarian Church should be in the business of cultivating humility and “increasing the sway of meekness and charity.” Furthermore, the claim that deeds have no impact on our worth is eerily reminiscent of the same claim by Martin Luther that we are only saved by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and deeds have nothing to do with it. In this manner Luther could claim that rape, slaughter, incest and murder could all be excused if the perpetrator only had faith.

Concerning the malleability of human nature, Jean Paul Sartre once wrote, “If it were not for the petty rules of bourgeois society, we humans would destroy each other in an instant.” Sartre was wrong. Actually our transformation from civilized human beings into beasts of destruction does not occur in an instant – it takes about six days. We know this from the results of the infamous Stanford Prison Experiment.

We should not be in the business of supporting Calhoun’s ignominious view of human worth by pledging our allegiance to the pillars that support his championing of slavery. We should rather be in the business of abandoning the rigid, inherency-based moral algebra constructed by Calhoun, and instead embrace the adaptive, deed-based moral calculus proposed by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Some people believe that we have achieved a final victory over slavery, but there is no such thing as a final victory. The battle must be refought again and again in each generation. We are the warriors who must carry on this fight, even if the combat nowadays is carried out in papers and statements of principles instead of on battlefields. The words we use are critical weapons in this fight. They must be chosen carefully, mindful of the history that has preceded us.