

# Spielberg stinks up math, politics, and film-making

By C.S. Morrissey  
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The reason why Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln* is such a disappointment is perhaps evident to those who have studied philosophy. For example, Trinity Western University professor Grant Havers, in his book *Lincoln and the Politics of Christian Love*, offers a philosophical counterpoint to the vision of history found in Spielberg's movie about Abraham Lincoln, the 16th U.S. president.

Havers argues against those who "contend that Christianity is too exclusivist to live up to the truly universal ideas of Lincoln." Such people "portray Lincoln as the paragon defender of natural rights while downplaying the religious particularity of his own thought."

On the contrary, argues Havers, "Lincoln's ideas are most comprehensible to a people already steeped in knowledge of the Bible. Lincoln honestly believed that the people of north and south were capable of understanding the injustice of slavery, although such an understanding rested on the Bible rather than mathematical reason."

"Even as the president of a divided nation, Lincoln assumed that the people of the south were good, and would eventually overthrow their usurping regime on their own; unfortunately, this did not happen," and Christian statesmanship was required.

The debate over Lincoln is important. On one side are those who maintain "Christianity is far too restrictive to be the foundation of a true universal politics." Because "self-evident truths cannot be exclusively Christian," it would seem that only self-evident truths, not Christian charity, should be at the basis of a just society.

On the other side is Havers' insistent counterpoint. His key thesis is that Lincoln "called for a politics of charity."

He points out that although "the very language of 'self-evident' truths of liberty and equality in the Declaration" of Independence seems to "suggest that acceptance of this kind of truth should be immediately



Dreamworks / CNS  
Actor Daniel Day-Lewis portrays U.S. president Abraham Lincoln in a scene from the movie *Lincoln*. Chris Morrissey writes the movie has a philosophically deficient script, but Day-Lewis gives a great performance.

intelligible to all, Christian or non-Christian," this was definitely not Lincoln's view and cannot explain Lincoln's actions.

Havers argues that Lincoln instead "called for a politics of charity precisely because the truths of the Declaration were not self-evident to all." Even if human reason is a universal fact rooted in human nature, "it would not be enough to encourage the practice of self-evident truths."

The movie gets this philosophical point completely backwards. Instead, screenwriter Tony Kushner portrays Lincoln's pursuit of the Thirteenth Amendment as flowing, not from Christian charity, but from mathematical reasoning analogous to the abstractions Lincoln read about in Euclid's *Elements*.

"Euclid's first common notion is this," says Lincoln in the film: "things which are equal to the same thing are equal to each other. That's a rule of mathematical reasoning. It's true because it works. Has done and always will do."

"In his book, Euclid says this is 'self-evident.' You see, there it is even in that 2,000-year-old book of mechanical law. It is a self-ev-

calls them 'glittering generalities'; another bluntly calls them 'self-evident lies'; and still others insidiously argue that they apply only 'to superior races.'"

Difficult though it is to teach someone mathematics (and to apply its self-evident truths in a process of reasoning), even more difficult is it to teach and apply the truth of the Declaration of Independence about human equality ("that all men are created equal").

Havers's book thus highlights what Tony Kushner's film script has deliberately omitted: "Lincoln's explanation for the persistent denial of equality rests on the biblical concept of sin. Sin is the deliberate violation of the moral law of charity."

"It is deliberate because the agent of sin knows the good and yet still chooses evil. Indeed, he convinces himself that the good is the evil, while he knows that this act is still a willful denial of the good."

This is what the philosopher Kierkegaard meant, notes Havers, when he observed our elaborate psychology when sinning: we always still "will the good" in our own minds, even when mind-independently, in action, we will the bad. We know we will the bad, yet at the same time we re-interpret that action in our minds as good.

"The entire people of America, North and South, knew better than what they merely professed about the injustice of slavery. Because they were both Christian peoples – they worshipped and prayed to the same God

– they differed over slavery only because one side denied the truth that it already knew," writes Havers.

The greatest failure of the movie is that its drama fails adequately to communicate this internal struggle of the sinning human person. In-

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fers the spectator a chance to cheer for the winning side.

The greatest success of the movie lies in the performance of Daniel Day Lewis, who transcends the philosophically deficient script and gives viewers a real sense of what it must have been like to be in the presence of Lincoln. It is a truly astonishing dramatization of how a human being, by cultivating the virtues of prudence and charity, achieves human greatness.

However, as Aristotle teaches in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (in a famous disagreement with Plato), prudent action cannot flow from mathematical calculation, which is why the movie miscalculates Lincoln's greatness so badly with its emblematic Euclid scene.

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The passing of the Thirteenth Amendment is reduced to a spectacle of contesting wills and power politics. The film merely of-

*For more on the film's cinematography and musical score see [bccatholic.ca](http://bccatholic.ca).* □



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