

The Many Dangers of Moral Antirealism

by **Anthony Lupo**¹

Though the useful is not always good, the good is always useful.

– **John Henry Newman**²

In 415 BCE, Athens commissioned a massive military expedition to extend its empire to Sicily.³ In less than three years, Spartan and Sicilian forces annihilated the largest joint force Athens had ever assembled. Athens's invasion reignited the Peloponnesian War on unfavorable conditions, and it rallied Sicilian powers that had shown little interest in Greek affairs. The disastrous campaign marked the beginning of the end of the Athenian empire, and its cause was internal to Athenian political life. As Thucydides argued, greed overcame prudence in the Athenian national character. Athens sought fortune over its own security interests.⁴

Thucydides's argument is both moral and causal: a moral failure caused Athens to invade Sicily. If Thucydides is right, morality provides the key to understanding Athens's decision making.

As simple as Thucydides's observation is, the joint force lacks the framework to make sense of it. Joint doctrine reduces morality to culture; it compresses moral concepts into the operational variables, or Political, Military, Economic, Social, Information, Infrastructure (PMESII) schema. Through its emphasis on morality as an aspect of culture, joint doctrine endorses a version of cultural relativism that mystifies moral reasoning and undermines its causal power. Explaining moral beliefs on relativist assumptions and the PMESII framework is like explaining why cricket never caught on in the U.S. It fails to treat morality seriously, and it cannot explain how a culture arrives at moral beliefs that change over time.

The problem is not just academic. Morality is normative. It exerts tremendous influence on how actors make decisions. Operationally, joint doctrine blinds the Commander to moral influences—the features of the operational environment that improve or worsen moral reasoning. More

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importantly, joint doctrine's tacit endorsement of cultural relativism undermines the moral basis of the profession of arms. When turned inward, it debases the Constitution of its moral significance. To overcome these problems, the joint force must accept moral realism as a framework for making sense of the operational environment.

A Blind Spot in Joint Doctrine

In philosophy, the view that there are objective standards of morality is called 'moral realism.' Realists believe that moral standards are independent of "*any given actual or hypothetical perspective.*"⁵ Since moral standards are objective, they are also universal. If murder is wrong in Paris, it is also wrong in Beijing. Further, morality is normative rather than descriptive. This means moral facts (i.e., true statements about morality or the moral quality of something) provide reasons for what should be done or avoided (normative). Moral facts are more than a report of what a person, group, or culture happens to find motivating (descriptive).⁶ Finally, moral beliefs influence the real world because they shape how actors understand right and wrong.

The opposite view is called 'antirealism.'⁷ Antirealists hold that either there are no moral standards (skepticism) or that standards are true only in relation to the perspective of some group or individual (subjectivism). Subjectivist antirealism is descriptive. For instance, cultural relativism holds that 'morality' is nothing more than a set of cultural beliefs about what should be done or avoided. According to subjectivists, it does not make sense to talk about morality outside of a cultural context because all morality is cultural. In a further wrinkle, some antirealists hold that moral claims are merely statements reporting an attitude of approval or disapproval.⁸ If John says "killing is wrong," what John actually means is that he disapproves of killing, "John disapproves of killing!"

One of the oldest expressions of moral realism is Plato's allegory of the cave. To Plato, the basic, unreflective condition of life is like being raised as a captive in a dark cave. Cave-dwellers see shadowy images projected on the wall by a dim fire. Ignorant of the world outside of the cave, they take the shadows for reality. They even name them according to conventions they establish. Meanwhile, philosophers venture out of the cave into the clear light of day where they perceive reality. The debate between realism and antirealism concerns whether there is such a thing as 'outside of the cave.' For most of human history, philosophers have held that there is.⁹

Antirealists hold that either there are no moral standards...

The branch of philosophy that deals with the nature of morality is called 'metaethics.' Metaethics runs one level deeper than most of the ethical questions military professionals typically consider. For example, whether bombing civilian targets in war is morally acceptable is an ethical question; but whether moral standards (e.g., the protected status of non-combatants) are objective, over-and-above culture, is a metaethical question. Though related, these two types of questions are distinct. In short, ethics is about what one should do or avoid, whereas metaethics is about how morality fits into reality.

Metaethical considerations are critical to the joint force. The Joint Force Commander uses the military instrument of national power to influence the operational environment to achieve a military end state. The operational environment is the "composite of the conditions, circumstances, and influences" that are relevant to the Command's mission;¹⁰ it is everything about the world that matters to an operation. If reality contains moral influences (i.e., 'moral facts with causal power') that influence the world, as realism suggests is possible, then the Commander ought to be interested in them. To

return to the Athenian example, a Joint Force Commander in the Aegean theater of operations in 415 BCE has every right to a Thucydidean explanation of why Athens invaded Sicily, even though it is primarily moral.

Joint doctrine makes no room for moral facts and influences. It is antirealist.

Joint doctrine makes no room for moral facts and influences. It is antirealist. Across the body of literature, joint doctrine characterizes morality as nothing more than a set of cultural beliefs that groups of people find motivating. For instance, *Joint Intelligence Preparation of the Operational Environment* describes “moralities,” note the plural, as only “perceptions.”¹¹ Information Operations conflate moral facts with other belief-dependent phenomena, such as “individual and cultural beliefs, norms, vulnerabilities, motivations, emotions, experiences, morals, education, mental health, identities, and ideologies.”¹² All of these, except mental health and education, are entirely subjective. In discussing legitimacy, *Joint Planning* pairs the “actual and perceived...morality, and rightness of actions from the perspectives of interested audiences.”¹³ By connecting ‘actual’ morality to perspectives, *Joint Planning* implies that morality is subjective. As mentioned earlier, subjectivism is antirealist because it denies objective moral standards. If 2018’s *Joint Concept for Operating in the Informational Environment* is any indication, joint doctrine is unlikely to turn from antirealism anytime soon.

The problem is not obvious, but it is serious. By embracing antirealism, joint doctrine is limited to a descriptive characterization of morality as culture. Like an accountant, joint doctrine directs analysts to list what a group believes. An accountant can read a ledger, but an accountant cannot explain why a purchase was

made. In a similar way, descriptive approaches struggle to explain why a group holds a moral belief. As discussed below, the causal chain is cut-off at the very moment it becomes useful. To joint doctrine, Athens’s decision to pursue an elective war against its own interests must remain a mystery. The only way to capture Thucydides’s argument in joint terms is to reframe the failure through a complicated account of PMESII variables.

So why be antirealist? Outside of academic philosophy¹⁴, the main appeal of antirealism is an observation called the ‘problem of moral disagreement.’ As J.L. Mackie writes, “radical disagreement between moral judgments makes it difficult to treat those judgments as apprehensions of moral truth.”¹⁵ In other words, moral disagreements between people of different backgrounds (or even within the same background and education level) indicate moral standards are not objective. Antirealism has an easier time explaining the wide range of moral judgments in global society.

Realists respond to this objection in several ways. First, realists highlight many areas of moral agreement across cultures.¹⁶ For instance, nearly all cultures punish murder, theft, sexual violence, and so on. Secondly, realists offer a view of moral reasoning that explains how people come to different moral beliefs. Unlike simple claims (e.g., ‘there is a chair in my office’), morality is “austere.”¹⁷ People come to understand moral facts indirectly, by perceiving aspects of goodness, like “sincerity, loyalty, honesty, and so on,” until they arrive at a rich picture of “*The Good* [as] an *indirect* object of moral judgment.”¹⁸ This process is difficult and fraught with error. As Plato said, the journey out of the cave is like an “ascent which is rough and steep.”¹⁹ It takes adjustment and is subject to all the passions, biases, temptations, and cognitive traps that compromise human thought.²⁰

Antirealism has not carried the day in academic philosophy.²¹ Generally, philosophers

consider moral realism the position with “common sense and initial appearances on its side.”²² For example, when John says “murder is wrong,” an average listener assumes John means to express a universal prohibition of murder. The cultural brackets implied by subjectivism are not assumed in normal language use. This means antirealism is, at first blush, an idiosyncratic explanation of moral language.

Moral Realism and the Constitution

Philosophy aside, there are overwhelming practical reasons why the joint force should endorse moral realism. Specifically, antirealism undermines conscience and the profession’s commitment to the Constitution.²³

If antirealism is true, the joint force supports and defends a Constitution whose ultimate authority stems from the accident of its ratification. To be an American at war is to represent the interests of the American tribe against all comers. Patriotism, flag-waving, and military parades provide spectacle and enchantment for what is really a means of distinguishing the American tribe, and its subjective moral standards, from others. What makes this culture worth celebrating is the fact that it belongs to us. On antirealism, the moral landscape resembles the creature of Stephen Crane’s imagination:

In the desert
I saw a creature, naked, bestial,
Who, squatting upon the ground,
Held his heart in his hands,
And ate of it.
I said, “Is it good, friend?”
“It is bitter — bitter,” he answered;
“But I like it
“Because it is bitter,
“And because it is my heart.”²⁴

To an antirealist, the Constitution only represents an American agreement about the shadows on the wall of the cave.²⁵ In Hobbesian

terms, “the desires, and other passions of man are in themselves no sin... till they know a law that forbids them: which till laws be made they cannot know.”²⁶ This law is the Constitution. There is no morality outside of it, and there was no morality before it. Therefore, there is no moral reason why the Constitution is worth defending, except that it happened to have been ratified. It is a short walk from here to the legal positivism (i.e., descriptive antirealism) of Stephen Douglas, *Dredd Scot v. Sandford*, and *Plessy v. Ferguson*.²⁷ In these cases, the positive law — the moral perspective represented in a culture’s laws — provided antirealist justification for human rights abuses, since there was no moral standard against which these laws could be considered unjust.

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The antirealist temptation was not available to the Founding Fathers because they had to justify republicanism over other possible regimes.²⁸ This justification found its source in the moral order. As Hamilton wrote, “good and wise men, in all ages... have supposed... an eternal and immutable law, which is, indispensably, obligatory upon all mankind, prior to any human institution whatsoever.”²⁹ This “immutable law” was expressed in the Declaration of Independence. As Lincoln argued, the “Declaration of Independence... has proved an ‘apple of gold’ to us... the Constitution [is] the ‘picture of silver,’ subsequently framed around it.”³⁰ In other words, the Constitution exists to realize the moral ends expressed in the Declaration. To Lincoln, “[the Constitution] is not the result of an accident... it has a philosophical cause,” that is, a moral cause outside of the positive law.³¹ In Lincoln’s debates against Douglas, he shows the ends and justification of the Constitution are ultimately

found outside of it, outside of the cave, in truths held to be ‘self-evident.’³² Lincoln’s reflections, just prior to the greatest crisis the Union had ever faced, echo the position of the Founding Fathers and early American jurists.³³

If realism is true, then the joint force supports and defends a Constitution that is, in principle, capable of realizing the moral standards it is based upon. At a minimum, these standards include those outlined in the Declaration of Independence. Patriotism is then a way of celebrating and reinforcing the authority of morality as it exists outside of and within American culture. The Constitution provides a mediating framework for sustaining the relationship between the profession of arms, American society, and the moral order. Realism makes it possible to draw a moral through line from the actions of a soldier on the battlefield to objective moral standards. This line passes through the Constitution.

The moral through line is tenuous in *the right ways*: it is sensitive to just war and professional military ethics. It sustains the will to persist in war when one is fighting for a just cause.

Since antirealism rejects this basis, it undermines the spirit of the profession of arms. When the tribe is threatened, the exigencies of self-defense satisfy conscience, but the American tribe has seldom been threatened in this way. In all other cases, antirealism provides a thin basis for doing violence or risking one’s life. Is it enough that the tribe wants something that one should risk one’s life to take it? This may be enough for a mercenary force, but it is poison to a professional army. Ironically, the thinness of this justification will be felt more acutely the nearer the profession is to achieving “moral expertise.”³⁴ There is an inverse relationship

between moral expertise, which every Service seeks to instill in its members, and the viability of antirealism as means of sustaining conscience in war. A well-formed conscience asks the questions a poorly formed conscience does not think to ask. Antirealism cannot answer these questions without undermining the moral framework implied by the Constitution.

Realism permits no ironies. As Lincoln wrote, “no oppressed people will fight, and endure, as our fathers did, without the promise of something better, than a mere change of masters.”³⁵ In this spirit, a Union soldier remarked in 1863: “sick as I am of this war and bloodshed, as much oh how much I want to be at home with my dear wife and children... every day I have a more religious feeling, that this war is a crusade for the good of mankind.”³⁶ On realism, moral expertise can perform the function it is assigned. Conscience tracks morality: it provides reasons, in the psychology of the soldier, to the extent that they are justified. The moral through line is tenuous in *the right ways*: it is sensitive to just war and professional military ethics. It sustains the will to persist in war when one is fighting for a just cause.

Moral Influences in the Operational Environment

There is one further practical reason why the joint force should accept moral realism. As mentioned before, realism provides a richer view of the operational environment because it provides a richer view of the world. Specifically, it provides an explanation for why groups arrive at moral claims and how these claims change over time. To illustrate this, we must first provide some examples of moral influences.

As an ancient realist, Aristotle held that happiness consists in virtuous living. People are habituated to virtuous living through forms of moral formation, including good parenting, legal and political systems, military training, and so on.³⁷ Those habituated to virtue come to

understand virtuous living as worth pursuing for itself, as what constitutes happiness, rather than pursuing for some other good, like public honors or wealth.³⁸ As Aristotle says, a virtuous person “is [already] in possession of first principles.”³⁹ For this reason, Aristotle maintained that anything that habituates virtue— whether laws, institutions, or youth basketball leagues— improves one’s moral capacity to be virtuous. Each of these is a moral cause because they influence our understanding of morality.

Moral influences are reflexive. They make a people more or less likely to accept or honor moral standards. By revealing or concealing what goodness is, moral influences support or decay one’s understanding of morality. Moral influences illuminate or obscure moral standards; they do not create them (as antirealists suppose). Since moral influences have a logical bent toward or away from objective moral standards, they are necessarily cross-cultural. To bind them to a cultural context, as antirealism does, is to give them no standard against which they can be improved or worsened. Social progress is difficult to understand on an antirealist basis.

Thucydides explained Athens’s decision to invade Sicily in moral terms, but there are more recent examples of the importance of moral influences. The Iraqi Ba’ath party, although intrinsically unjust, especially under Saddam Hussein, included many subordinate institutions that performed key moral functions at the local level.⁴⁰ De-Baathification removed all these moral influences, including the good ones. Others took their place.⁴¹ In the modern security environment, Russian New Generation Warfare seeks “reflexive control,” or to “locate the weak link in the [adversary’s] system and exploit it through moral arguments, psychological tactics, or appeals to specific leaders’ character.”⁴² The efficacy of the Russian approach has less to do with volume and more to do with how viciously it manipulates moral influences to dramatic effect.

Joint doctrine assumes these subtleties have a place within the PMESII variables, on an antirealist and social scientific framework. Every moral cause is ‘Political,’ ‘Social,’ or ‘Informational’ in a trivial sense as these categories are all-encompassing. However, the salient feature of a moral cause is its capacity for a *moral* effect. Unlike the categories of social science, moral influences have a natural directedness toward or away from moral standards. Absent a realist basis, PMESII analysis does not have this directedness. The PMESII approach in doctrine emphasizes a simple classification of things over an understanding of how they influence the moral landscape of a society.

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The PMESII approach is also severely limited by the rules of logic. Philosophers call drawing moral conclusions from only non-moral premises the naturalistic fallacy. Non-evaluative facts, such as ‘this apple is red,’ cannot entail evaluative conclusions of the kind ‘apples are good.’ Even a hundred non-moral facts about apples (e.g., they are round, have cores, contain vitamins, etc.) do not entail a single moral fact about them (e.g., they are good). To make a valid argument, one must explain what makes an apple good. There must be a moral premise somewhere in an argument to arrive at a valid moral conclusion. Similarly, in a causal story of moral beliefs, there must be a moral cause, whether good or bad, that makes a belief moral to an agent. Consider the following example.

The Joint Force wants to understand John, a key player in the operational environment.

Using the antirealist PMESII model, joint analysts correctly determine that ‘John believes might makes right.’ To explain why John holds this belief— in keeping with descriptive antirealism— analysts appeal to the brute fact of John’s culture. ‘This is just the way John is,’ they say. As an antirealist, the analyst cannot explain why John believes ‘might makes right’ is a true moral claim, because no number of descriptive claims (e.g., ‘John believes x’) entail that John’s conclusion is a true moral claim. But this is exactly why John holds this claim, because he believes it is a true moral claim. At most, the analyst can say that John’s belief is consistent with his other beliefs. If pressed for more, the analyst is in a dilemma: he must either conclude that John’s belief is arbitrary (i.e., no explanation is possible) or that John is irrational (e.g., makes invalid arguments). Antirealism accepts these conclusions. The analyst cannot escape the naturalistic fallacy and make John’s conclusion rational, regardless of whether it is correct, because the analyst has rejected realism.

Whenever the joint force employs antirealism to understand the adversary, it necessarily renders them inscrutable.

Whenever the joint force employs antirealism to understand the adversary, it necessarily renders them inscrutable. The naturalistic fallacy cuts antirealism off from meaningful explanations. Other cultures are alien. John only makes sense to John’s family (provided their moral outlook is the same). Rather than respecting moral disagreement across cultures, antirealism undermines the sense in which these disagreements can have any meaning. Other groups cannot be rational actors except to themselves. Joint doctrine cannot explain why a person or group believes a given proposition is moral— why it “justif[ies]

the ascription of reasons” in a particular case— except as a brute fact of culture.⁴³

The antirealism of joint doctrine is probably intended to protect the joint force from cultural blunder. This intention is noble, but the execution misses the mark. There is no culture on earth that consciously places culture before morality. Even if many moral views are culturally determined, it never appears that way to the people that hold them.⁴⁴ Antirealism is pessimistic in a way that no culture is. The antirealism of joint doctrine is a way of projecting this pessimism on the world.

As the Athenian example shows, it is only greed, the difference between what Athens ought to have done and what it did do, that explains why Athens assumed imprudent risk. Culture is an elastic concept, but it is not elastic enough to explain the interplay of greed and security interests.

The Realist Way Forward

Joint doctrine’s system-centric approach to characterizing the operational environment has several advantages. By emphasizing the relationship between elements in a system, the Joint Intelligence Preparation of the Operational Environment (JIPOE) methodology provides a detailed understanding of the operational environment. With some minor modifications, joint doctrine can retain its ‘systems-centric’ approach and accommodate moral influences. The elements of the solution are already present in joint doctrine.

According to *Joint Planning*, “tendencies reflect the inclination to think or behave in a certain manner.”⁴⁵ Similarly, “potential is the inherent ability or capacity for the growth or development of a specific interaction or relationship.”⁴⁶ The reflexivity of moral influences can be understood as an interplay of moral tendencies and potentials within a system. A moral cause shapes the tendencies of moral reasoning within a society and increases or decreases the potential for morality to motivate

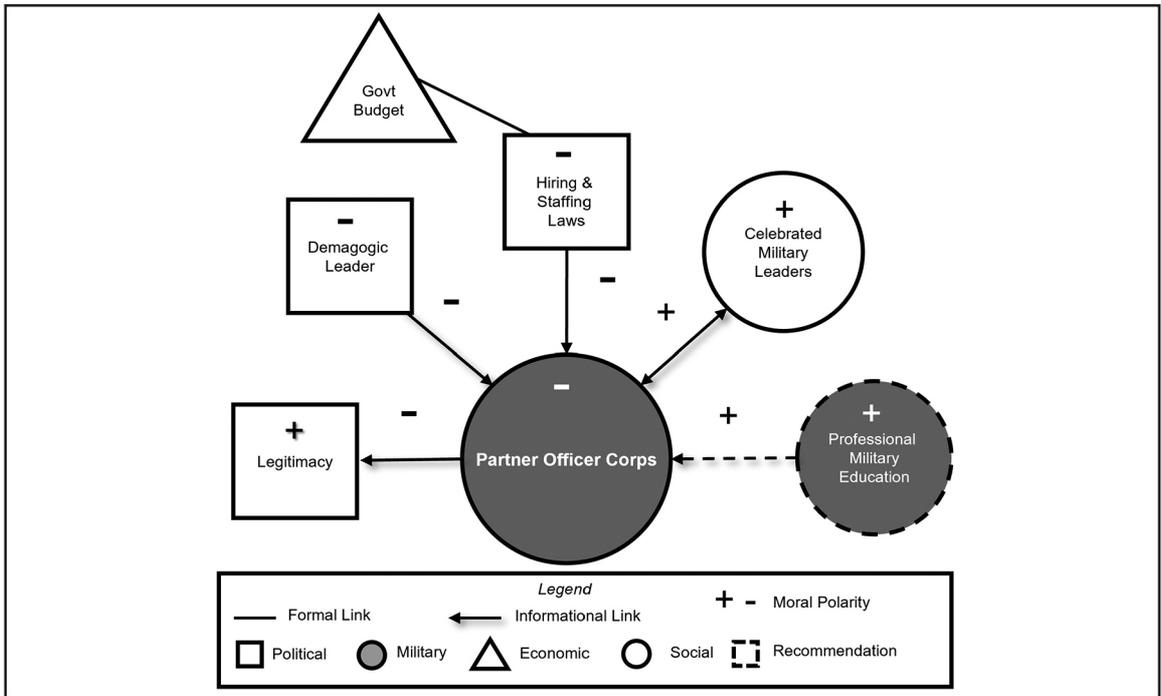


Figure 1. Moral Polarity and PMESII Analysis

actors. This interplay influences the moral landscape of a system.

One way to incorporate moral influences onto a system-centric view of the operational environment is to add polarity to the nodes and links of the system (see Figure 1). If a node has a positive polarity, then the analyst assesses it is exerting a positive moral influence on the system. In some way, the node is reinforcing virtue, rule of law, justice, etc. In short, the node makes a society more receptive of true moral claims. If a node has a negative polarity, it is diminishing or distorting beliefs about morality. Of note, a node may positively relate to some nodes and negatively relate to others. Where this is the case, the analyst can add polarity to links in the system.

This approach is simple but powerful. For instance, if the problem is corruption in a country’s officer corps, the analyst should be able to describe the moral influences (or lack thereof) contributing to this condition. This enables the Joint Force Commander to visualize the operational environment and to generate options that correct the problem. Reasonable recommendations might be to enforce a policy against nepotism or to increase professionalism by founding new professional education institutions. The joint force is already pursuing options of this kind, seemingly against its own antirealist assumptions about morality.⁴⁷

This recommendation is no silver bullet. Since every mission is unique, moral facts and causes may not always be relevant to the operational environment. If the problem is an enemy tank division in the desert, then moral influences are unlikely to be relevant, especially at first. However, as the current National Defense Strategy seeks to “strengthen alliances and attract new partnerships,” the joint force should expect the global appeal of “a free and open international order” to depend on moral influences.⁴⁸ The first step to achieving this goal is to assess the polarity of moral influences as they are. But it is only a first step.

Analysts will require education to understand and assess moral influences. They do not need to be philosophers or anthropologists, but they will need a basic grasp of ethical and political theory.

Ethical theory establishes the moral standards that give choices and culture meaning; political theory explains how moral influences shape the operational environment. Together they provide a solid foundation for understanding the operational environment, much in the same way the Declaration of Independence, as both a political and moral work, explains the moral foundation of the profession of arms. The road ahead is difficult. For this approach to work, there is “need of habituation,” as Plato would say.⁴⁹ The joint force must be willing to present morality within a realist framework. Doctrine must take care to distinguish moral influences from cultural phenomena, even as ‘moral’ beliefs differ between cultures. To be clear, the joint force need not embrace realism explicitly. It is enough to sever its antirealist commitments and allow common sense to take over. This better aligns the joint force’s approach to the operational environment and preserves the deepest convictions of the profession of arms. It gives joint force commanders the tools to think through a complex and fragile world. **IAJ**

Notes

1 This article is a summary of my “Moral Realism and the Operational Art” (master’s thesis, Command and General Staff College, 2021) and reflects fruitful discussion with Dr. Jackie Kem, CH (MAJ) Jonathan Bailey, Mr. William Knight, MAJ Clyde Daines, Cecili Chadwick, CPT Nickolas Lupo, Dr. John W. Bauer, Reverend Brian Welter, Kyle Staron, Samuel VanKopp, and, most specially, Lisa V. Lopez.

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- 23 This argument borrows heavily from Hadley Arkes, *Beyond the Constitution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990) and Harry V. Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Issues in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 50th Anniversary Edition ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 308-329.
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Contributors Wanted!

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