

## Debate: Reparations for Slavery (Friday, 11/15)

### The Question

In 2018, the College of William & Mary formally acknowledged and apologized for its history of slavery, stating, “William & Mary enslaved people, exploited them and their labor, and perpetuated the legacies of racial discrimination. The Board profoundly regrets these activities, apologizes for them, expresses its deep appreciation for the contributions made by the African American members of its community to the vitality of William & Mary then, now, and for all time coming, and commits to continue our efforts to **remedy the lingering effects of past injustices.**” (emphasis mine)

There is mention of a remedy, but what *is* that remedy? Perhaps in answer, later in 2018, W&M (in conjunction with UVA) resolved to erect [a memorial](#) to past enslaved peoples at the College. But, does this action go far enough to “remedy the lingering effects of past injustices”?

In 2019, a proposal to go much, much further has gained considerable momentum: Namely, a proposal for reparations for slavery. Specifically, it is proposed that the U.S. government should compensate the descendants of enslaved people for the lingering effects of past injustices in the form of cash payments.

The conversation was actually re-ignited back in 2014, by Ta-Nehisi Coates in his incredibly influential article on the topic (article [here](#); interview [here](#)). But in late 2018, the issue gained more steam as many Democratic presidential candidates began endorsing it (e.g., [Cory Booker](#), [Marianne Williamson](#), [Julian Castro](#), [Kamala Harris](#), [Elizabeth Warren](#), and [Beto O'Rourke](#)).<sup>1</sup>

Then, in January of 2019, a 1989 bill to study reparations was reintroduced; and that June, a hearing was held by a subcommittee of the House of Representatives, investigating the issue. (See Coates' and his opponent's testimony [here](#).) Further surveys of the issue [here](#) and [here](#).

**Reparations: A Good Idea?** When you wrong someone, or harm them, you have a moral duty to remedy the situation. If you steal something, you ought to return it. If you hurt someone, you ought to make it up to them. The primary motivation for reparations has to do with the fact that enslaved people were seriously wronged, and their descendants continue to suffer harms as a result of those wrongs into the present day. Therefore, we ought to make it up to them. Consider: Today, there are still significant racial disparities in **income** (the median white household is almost 7 times wealthier than the median black household: \$933,700 vs. \$138,200 – [here](#)), **health** (the life expectancy of white people is 3.5 years longer than that of black people; 78.8 vs. 75.3 years – [here](#)), **education** (predominantly white school districts receive \$23 billion more in funding than predominantly black districts; or, \$2,226 more per student, on average – [here](#)), and **criminal justice** (the incarceration rate for African-Americans is five times higher than that of whites – [here](#)). The claim is that (a) the ill effects of our immoral past *are* still being felt today, (b) this is an injustice, and (c) we have a moral duty to remedy it.

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<sup>1</sup> Note, however, that the issue of reparations is not simply one of left vs. right. Several Democratic presidential candidates have opposed it (e.g., Bernie Sanders and Amy Klobuchar). Neither Barack Obama nor Hillary Clinton supported it; and, interestingly, in 1975, then-Senator Joe Biden said, “I don’t feel responsible for the sins of my father and grandfather. I feel responsible for what the situation is today, for the sins of my own generation. And I will be damned if I feel responsible to pay for what happened 300 years ago.”

Furthermore, there is precedent for the proposal. For instance, after World War II, Germany paid reparations to Holocaust victims for the atrocities it committed against them ([here](#)), and the U.S. paid reparations to the Japanese Americans that it incarcerated in concentration camps ([here](#)).

**Reparations: A Bad Idea?** But, the proposal for reparations has had its fair share of critics. In fact, according to a Gallup poll, conducted in June and July, 2019, ([here](#)) a majority of Americans (67%) oppose reparations for slavery. Several objections are raised against it:

- It is too late for reparations. In the examples given from WWII, the victims were still alive to be compensated for the wrongdoings against them. But, in the case of slavery, the victims are no longer alive to be compensated. Furthermore, those doing the compensating would not be the ones who perpetrated the crime. In effect, the descendants of slave-owners would essentially be punished for the moral crimes of their ancestors. This is an injustice.
- It gets even messier. To be practical, the money would have to come from a blanket federal tax. (It would be too complicated to try to figure out who is a descendant of slave owners, etc.) This means that descendants of *union soldiers* and of *slaves themselves* would *also* be funding reparations.
- The real problem today is racism, both overt and structural. But, it seems likely that white people would consider the issue of racism “done” or “over” after reparations. For instance, once you pay a fine, that issue is settled. Yet, the issue of racial injustice would be far from settled once reparations were paid. (Imagine a possible scenario: Whites respond to a black person’s charges of racism with, “We already settled that issue.” Worse still: A Neo-Nazi thinks to himself, “The government made me pay for racism. I’d better get my money’s worth!”) In short, reparations might stifle momentum toward racial justice, or even worsen racial tensions.
- Clearly we need to put efforts toward abolishing racism and racial injustice. But, the money could be better spent elsewhere. For instance, on repairing inequalities in schools, or fixing environmental racism (e.g., Flint, MI), and so on.
- The Non-Identity Problem adds another complication: Because different sperm-egg combinations result in different individuals, had there not been slavery in the U.S., none of the presently existing descendants of African slaves would have existed. Therefore, these descendants were actually *benefitted* by slavery, because without slavery they would never have been born at all.

You may find this influential article on the topic ([here](#)) useful; and further discussion [here](#) and [here](#).

## Your Task

Question: Should the U.S. government make reparations for slavery in the form of monetary payments to the descendants of enslaved people?

You have been divided you into two groups. One group will argue that the answer to the above questions is “yes” (this group will argue *in favor of* reparations). The other group will argue that the answer is “no” (this group will argue *against* reparations).

Before you begin your own independent research on this issue, an excellent place to start is by reading the excellent entry at *1000-Word Philosophy*, [here](#).

## Getting Started

Now that you have met your teammates, I encourage you to continue to email one another, exchange phone numbers, arrange to meet, etc.

You may want to do a bit of research before you begin, in order to familiarize yourself with some of the common reasons that each side gives in defense of their position.

## What To Do

Opening statement: Please elect one or more spokespersons from your group to give an opening statement of 3-5 minutes. During this opening statement, you will present some argument or reasons for believing that your group has the correct answer to the questions above.

Response statement: After both teams give their opening statements, each group will be given a couple of minutes to brainstorm quietly, to agree on what your group will say in response to your opponents. Please elect one or more spokespersons from your group to give a 3 minute response statement. During this response statement, you will provide some reason or justification for believing that what the opposing group has just said is mistaken.

Open discussion: At the end, the two teams will be allowed some time to discuss the issue with one another informally, before I open discussion to the entire class for Q&A.

## Format

Event	Time Allotment
Team "YES" opening statement	3-5 minutes
Team "NO" opening statement	3-5 minutes
Team "YES" brainstorm session	2 minutes
Team "YES" response statement	2-3 minutes
Team "NO" brainstorm session	2 minutes
Team "NO" response statement	2-3 minutes
Informal open discussion between teams	5 minutes
Informal Q&A between teams and class	25 minutes

## Grading

This assignment is worth 10% of your grade. Half of this grade will be assigned by myself based on the performance of your team during the class debate. The other half of this grade will be based on peer assessment. You will be graded by the other members of your team in an anonymous survey following the debate. Here are some things I'll be looking for:

- Are the arguments that you present clear, carefully stated, and persuasive?
- Do you handle questions, criticisms, etc., clearly, carefully, and persuasively?
- Is it apparent that your team has put some careful thought and consideration into this issue?
- Do you function well as a *team*? (e.g., avoid contradicting, bickering with, or talking over your own teammates)