Thomas R. Dew’s Defense of Slavery (1832)

Thomas R. Dew, a young professor at William and Mary College in Virginia, was one of the earliest defenders of the institution of slavery. In the following excerpts from his Review of the Debate in the Virginia Legislature of 1831 and 1832, published in 1832, Dew denied that slavery was unchristian, immoral, or undemocratic. In the years to follow his arguments were supplemented by almost everyone of importance in the South. As you read Dew’s review, think about the following questions:

1. In your opinion, how convincing are each of Dew’s arguments?

2. How might an abolitionist have challenged his arguments?

.... It is said slavery is wrong ... and contrary to the spirit of Christianity ... we ... deny most positively, that there is anything in the Old or New testament, which would go to show that slavery, when once introduced, ought at all events to be abrogated (abolished), or that the master commits any offense in holding slaves. The children of Israel themselves were slaveholders, and were not condemned for it ... they were permitted expressly to purchase slaves of the heathen, and keep them as an inheritance for their posterity; and even the children of Israel might be inslaved for six years. When we turn to the New Testament, we find not one single passage at all calculated to disturb the conscience of an honest slaveholder. No one can read it without seeing and admiring that the meek and humble Savior of the World in no instance meddled with the established institutions of mankind; he came to save a fallen world, and not to excite the black passions of men and array them in deadly hostility against each other...

But it is further said that the moral effects of slavery are of the most deleterious and hurtful kind; ... Look to the slaveholding population of our country, and you every where find them characterized by noble and elevated sentiments, by humane and virtuous feelings ... It is not
a fact, known to every man in the south, that the most cruel masters are those who have been
unaccustomed to slavery, It is well known that northern gentlemen who marry southern
heiresses, are much severer masters than southern gentleman ..

     ... a merrier being does not exist on the face of the globe, than the negro slave ... When
then, since the slave is happy.... should we endeavor to disturb his contentment by infusing into
his mind a vain and indefinite desire for liberty a something which he cannot comprehend, and
which must inevitable dry up the very sources of his happiness... ?

     It has been contended that slavery is unfavorable to a republican spirit; ...

     ... (a) cause of this (southern spirit of liberty) is the perfect spirit of equality so prevalent among
the whites of all the slaveholding states . . . The menial and low offices being all performed by
the blacks, there is at once taken away the greatest cause of distinction, the true mark of
aristocracy, and all who are white are equal in spite of the variety of occupation ...

_Thomas R. Dew, Review of the Debate in the Virginia Legislature of 1831 and 1832 (1832),
pp. 106-13._