

## D IS FOR . . .

### EUGENE DEBS (1855-1926)

Source: *The Bending Cross: A Biography of Eugene Victor Debs* by Ray Ginger (Author, 1949), Mike Davis (Introduction)

#### LIFE EVENTS

Eugene Victor Debs was one of several children born to Daniel and Daisy Debs, who emigrated from Alsace, France to Terre Haute, Indiana in 1851. Daniel was highly educated because his father had owned a cotton mill and a meat packing business; Daisy had been a worker in the mill. The works of Victor Hugo, especially Les Miserables and The Hunchback of Notre Dame were favorite books in the Debs household. They even gave Eugene the middle name of Victor. Eugene came to admire the revolutionary spirit of both the French and the Americans. His heroes included Thomas Paine and Patrick Henry.

Life was not orderly, clean, or easy in the frontier town of Terre Haute. In time it would become a crossroads for the canals, railroads, and the National Road. The Debs family operated a grocery store out of the front room of their house. Eugene was 5-9 years old during the Civil War. Although there was a lot of pro-slavery sentiment in Terre Haute, Eugene was most fascinated by the union troop trains that went through town.

In fact, railroads became a central theme in his life. At age 14 he quit school (much to his regret later) and got a job cleaning grease off of freight trains for fifty cents per day. Later he was promoted to paint scraper, then painter of signs along the tracks from Terre Haute to Indianapolis. When a fireman didn't show up for work one day, he became a locomotive fireman. Railroaders had very dangerous jobs with no safety standards, many accidents and fatalities. After five years Eugene's mother asked him to come home to a safer job; he became a clerk for the Hulman Wholesale

-----  
Barbara M. Stillwell. (2021). D is for ... Eugene Debs (1855-1926). In Gaffney, M.M. & Galvin, M.R., eds. An Encyclopedia of Conscience. IU Conscience Project. Accessible from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1805/27074>.

Grocer....and hated it. His heart remained with the railroaders and, in time, with all industrial workers.

Starting with a commitment to railroad workers, Debs progressed from organizing the Terre Haute Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen to being part of the Supreme Council of United Orders of Railroad Workers to the American Railroad Union to involvement with the International Workers of the World (IWW or Wobblies) and finally becoming the spiritual father of the Socialist party. Along the way political splits and divisiveness developed in each of the organizations and through it all Debs was continuously developing as a moral being. This got him into a lot of trouble as well as making him a very inspiring being.

At first he was opposed to strikes, thinking that conflicts with employers could be engaged with reason and compromise. He became frustrated when some Brotherhoods colluded with industrialists against a fellow brotherhood. By the time of the Pullman strike he was in favor of strikes as long as everyone pulled together. Hence, the American Railroad Union. President Cleveland's injunction backed by federal troops landed him in jail and destroyed the ARU. Still he refused to advocate violence except in the case of self-defense. Finally he began to think in terms of all industrial workers and saw them as being at war with industrialism and capitalism, and government. This led him to form the Socialist Party and run for president in 1900, 1908, 1912, 1916, and 1920.

By the time of the World War Debs began to believe that industrial competition was the root of war while workers were sent to fight the battles. He spoke out against the war in defiance of the Espionage Act and was sent to the federal penitentiary in Atlanta.

### **CONSCIENCE**

Eugene V Debs can be best understood in terms of domains of conscience:

**CONCEPTUALIZATION:** Eugene Debs defined his conscience as the most private of all places. It was the "Great Umpire" and he was the only spectator near enough to hear the umpire's decisions.

**MORALIZATION OF ATTACHMENT:** Debs was incredibly loyal to his family and wife and they, in turn, to him and his goals. From his father he absorbed the spirit of Les Miserables: redemption through brotherhood. He was also loyal to his brother, Theodore, who worked side by side with him throughout his lifetime.

**MORAL-EMOTIONAL RESPONSIVENESS:** Debs was both passionate and compassionate. The intensity of his concern for, first, railway workers, and finally, all workers of the world, led him to giving so freely of his own money that his wife had to establish her own checking account.

Debs' humanitarian aspirations were always ahead of what could be accomplished. When things didn't work out (e.g. strikes failed or there was conflict among the leadership of union organizations or political parties), he might go into long periods of public silence and then come out strongly either through editorials or exhaustive speaking tours about what he thought was the next right thing to do. We could interpret the "silence" as periods of depression (known as melancholy in his day.) In addition to melancholy, he was bothered by headaches, rheumatism, and lumbago. After a period of rest, sometimes in a sanitarium that advocated fruits and grains as well as minimal contact with people, he would mobilize his energies and resume his fight for the common worker.

Each time he was imprisoned, both the wardens and fellow prisoners noted that they never knew a kinder man. In the Atlanta federal prison, he earned the name of "Little Jesus" because he gave away his own supply of tobacco.

## **MORAL VALUATION**

**AUTHORITY-DERIVED VALUATION:** Although Debs was very respectful of his own parents, he had little respect for the authority of religion or leaders who did not work in behalf of the common people. He considered Jesus a social advocate. His idols were all rebels: Thomas Paine, Patrick Henry, John Brown, and Karl Marx. He did not respect industrialists who would not compromise with workers. Furthermore, he did not respect presidents who sent in federal troops

to break up strikes or who participated in wars in behalf of industry (e.g., the invasion of Mexico). He would not honor the sedition laws during the Great War because he thought it was an immoral war.

**PEER DERIVED VALUATION:** Concern for others governed his life. His peer-focused values changed over his lifetime. First, he believed in negotiation with industrialists without strikes, thinking the reason would carry the day. By the time of the Pullman strike he became such an advocate of the boycott that it was called “Debs’s strike”. He believed that strikers should resort to violence only in behalf of self-defense. As his values expanded to the needs of all workers and his discontent grew regarding industrial-political alliances, he became the father of the Socialist Party and ran as their candidate for president five times, the last time from the Atlanta federal prison.

**SELF-DERIVED VALUATION:** Debs was responsible, but at times self-sacrificial. As a young billing clerk for the Hulman wholesale grocery, Debs said that business was just “grabbing for yourself”. When he had the opportunity to help form the Vigo branch of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, he left his clerking job. When he dropped out of the Railroad Brotherhoods because he wanted to work for all laborers, the organization insisted that he continue publishing their journal called *The Magazine*. They offered him \$3000/year; he would only take \$1000. He once borrowed \$29,000 on his own credit to keep a strike going. When he was exhausted and returned home from his vigorous speaking schedules, his wife would have to turn visitors away at the door to ensure that he got needed rest.

## **Moral Volition**

Debs never deviated from what he thought was right although his ideas about what was “right” changed with time. Always intense and tenacious. When he and others refused to honor President Cleveland’s orders to break the boycott of the Pullman Palace Company and were sent to the Cook County Jail, Debs said “Having only acted in this matter in obedience to the dictates of our conscience and our judgment, we shall accept with philosophic composure any penalties, however severe, the courts may see fit to impose.” He was always trying to break through factionalism toward a

greater truth. Neither union organizations nor political parties totally satisfied him. His continuing idealism is best captured in that most famous quote as he was being sentenced to 10 years in Federal prison for sedition: "...while there is a lower class I am in it; while there is a criminal element, I am of it; while there is a soul in prison, I am not free."

BMS

## About this Work

Margaret M. Gaffney & Matthew R. Galvin, editors. *An Encyclopedia of Conscience*. IU Conscience Project. Accessible from: <https://scholarworks.iupui.edu/handle/1805/27074>.

Since 2001, our Conscience Project meetings have regularly included lively discussions and applications of the conceptual framework of conscience theory - stages, domains and bedrock/intrinsic values – to the ideas we are studying in ethics, neuroscience, education, philosophy, psychology and theology. Early on, Dr. Barbara Stilwell compiled an alphabetical list of authors who may or may not have been explicit about conscience, but who deeply influenced our theory of conscience as it evolved, and recently, we have begun to apply the same conscience-sensitive approaches to character/author analyses in the histories, biographies, and other literature, fact and fiction, we are reading. We are excited to see how these unique conscience-sensitive approaches can enrich our own writing and teaching in humanistic medicine, general humanities, and specifically, moral education. The brief entries in this **Encyclopedia of Conscience** are not meant to be full biographies, but rather to provide an imaginative sketch of the form and function of each subject’s conscience. We welcome ideas and additions.



This work is licensed by the IU Conscience Project under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).