

Frederick Douglass's Political Theory of the Powerless: Natural Rights from Below

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This article draws from Frederick Douglass's antebellum and wartime writings to reconstruct his approach to natural rights. Douglass admired many elements of the Enlightenment legacy. Yet in the same motion that he echoes European and American thinkers, he subtly qualifies, corrects, and revises their ideas, sometimes in radical ways. In his depictions of slavery, natural rights cease to be metaphysical abstractions and instead become embodied in our social relations. While they persist in outline, their substance is transformed to account for racialized power and structural violence. In this way, Douglass redefines a number of liberalism's key moral and political concepts, including freedom, reason, dignity, and moral responsibility. He develops a political theory designed to reinforce the Enlightenment's bare foundations with social insights of the oppressed: a philosophy of natural rights, told from below.

The slaveholder has spoken but the slave remained dumb. On the side of the oppressor is power, on the side of the slave weakness.


—Frederick Douglass, “The Proclamation and a Negro Army” ([1863] 1986)

Most acts of power from below, even when they are protests—implicitly or explicitly—will largely observe the ‘rules’ even if their objective is to undermine them.

—James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990, 93)

Many political theorists today align themselves with the powerless—the poor, the dominated, the marginalized, the stigmatized. With important exceptions, however, political theory's key concepts emerge from an elite discourse, not a subaltern one; they are for the powerless, not from them. Frederick Douglass is one of these exceptions. He lived for 20 years as a slave and for 9 years as a fugitive from slavery. He gained his extraordinary erudition and rhetorical ability without any formal education. And he spent much of his life advocating for the causes of the vulnerable: slave abolition, equal citizenship for Black Americans, and women's rights.

While Douglass has long been vital for Black social thought and philosophy, the past two decades have seen a surge of interest in his ideas among political theorists.¹

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¹ It would be impossible to do justice to the formative impact of Douglass's ideas on Black social and political philosophy. Classic examples include works by Washington (1906) and Du Bois (2005).

Sharon Krause (2002), Margaret Kohn (2005), and Nick Bromell (2013), for example, have probed the democratic implications of Douglass's thoughts on violent resistance.² Nolan Bennett (2019) has uncovered the moral claims embedded in Douglass's antebellum autobiographies, showing how he used the medium to forge a “new community” with his readers. Emma Saunders-Hastings (2021) has argued that his critique of “tainted” gifts—money donated by American slaveholders—can inform our thinking and enhance our political judgment. Rob Goodman (2023) has demonstrated how he both adopted and subverted the Ciceronian rhetorical tradition by innovating the role of the “orator-slave.” And Michael C. Hawley (2024) has proposed that Douglass can help us think about the normative quandaries of rhetoric, including the moral limits of persuasion.

Yet even as readers have highlighted Douglass's insights, they have often interpreted their meaning and provenance in two broadly divergent ways. One group has framed Douglass's ideas as essentially continuous with those of western philosophy, and in particular, the Enlightenment's natural rights tradition. By this view, expressed most famously by John Locke and echoed in America's Declaration of Independence, human beings have certain inalienable entitlements, foremost among them the protection of their lives,

Prominent recent books, some of which are critical of Douglass, include those by Hanchard (2006), Gooding-Williams (2009), Johnson (2011), Mills (2015), Roberts (2015), Threadcraft (2016), and Rogers (2023). More general treatments of Douglass's life and thought include biographies by Martin (1984), Stauffer (2009), Levine (2016), and Blight (2018). See also the volumes edited by Sundquist (1993), Lee (2009), and Turner and Rogers (2021).

² Douglass's views on physical resistance, including how he describes his own fight with the slaver “Mr. Covey,” were extremely influential. His narrative depictions can be found in his first two autobiographies ([1845] 2016, 83–7; [1855] 2014, 197–8), but he discusses the normative and psychological mandate to violently resist tyranny throughout his writings and speeches ([1852] 2015, 228, 236; [1854] 2022; [1857] 1986a; [1857] 1986b).

property, and freedom (Boxill 1992–1993; Myers 2005; 2008; Crane 2009; Buccola 2012; Turner 2012). Peter Myers, for example, has argued that “Douglass was right in finding in the natural rights principles of the Declaration of Independence a necessary and sufficient basis for addressing the nation’s racial problems” (2008, 12). Nicholas Buccola has proposed that Douglass belongs squarely in the “liberal tradition” in so far as he believed that “natural rights philosophy...ought to be the guiding compass of our political life,” the means by which “all human institutions are to be judged” (2012, 46, 74). Prima facie this view has much in its favor: There is little doubt that Douglass, at least rhetorically, subscribed to natural rights in some form. “I have never placed my opposition to slavery on a basis so narrow as my own enslavement,” Douglass insists, in a letter prefacing his second autobiography, “but rather upon the indestructible and unchangeable laws of human nature” ([1855] 2014, 6). Though he began his career deeply skeptical of American’s founding documents, he eventually came to embrace them (Schrader 1999; Ives 2018; Blight 2018; Rebeiro 2022).³

A second group of theorists, while acknowledging that Douglass invoked the ideas of his time, interpret his true aims as far more radical. This subversive—or what Juliet Hooker (2017) and Nick Bromell (2021) have called “fugitive”—Douglass did not merely demand that natural rights be applied consistently to all races; he sought to criticize their philosophical foundations by revealing their weaknesses and aporias. This reading is also backed by significant evidence. As Hooker has shown, attending to Douglass’s reflections on Latin America reveals how he “forged a radical black fugitive democratic ethos that impacted his vision of a future US multiracial policy” (2017, 29). According to Neil Roberts, those who impute a liberal framework to Douglass miss his “romantic vision” of freedom as a “psychological” and not only “moral or physical quality”—a state which must often be achieved through struggle and which must be conceived in comparative rather than absolute terms (2015, 73–4). Bromell puts the “fugitive” thesis even more strongly: readers inaccurately attribute a more conventional political philosophy to Douglass because they neglect how he had to “use the very conceptual categories that consisted and maintained [the white] order of things, even though they were often inappropriate, and at times inimical, to what he saw from his perspective” (Bromell 2021, 55–6).

³ Douglass endorses the idea, found in Locke and echoed in the American Declaration of Independence, that natural rights have their ultimate origin in God. His writings and speeches frequently invoke religious and scriptural claims to justify them. Here, for example, is how he describes the influence of the *Columbian Orator*’s theological arguments against slavery: “I got a bold and powerful denunciation of oppression, and a most brilliant vindication of the rights of man....If I ever wavered under the consideration, that the Almighty, in some way, ordained slavery, and willed my enslavement for his own glory, I wavered no longer” ([1855] 2014, 128–9). Indeed, as Myers has argued, Douglass’s “rational faith” in natural rights led him to believe that slavery was “doomed to fail” (2008, 49).

Both the “Lockean” and “fugitive” renderings of Douglass capture important dimensions of his thought: his writings bear the clear imprint of natural rights philosophy; simultaneously, they often critique or modify elements of that philosophy. Rather than choosing between these readings, therefore, this article builds upon both to propose a novel interpretive lens and, with it, an original conception of natural rights. Douglass did admire natural rights in theory. In practice, he believed they had feet of clay, crumbling under the injustices of America’s slave system. His response was to rebuild them. In the same motion that he echoes prominent European and American thinkers, Douglass subtly qualifies, corrects, and revises their ideas, sometimes in significant ways. Drawing from his intimate experiences with racialized power and structural violence, he develops a political theory designed to reinforce the Enlightenment’s bare foundations with social insights of the oppressed. I refer to this theory, which I reconstruct from Douglass’s antebellum and wartime writings, as natural rights from below.⁴

Douglass, I argue, accomplished his regrounding of natural rights through two main techniques that I call *embodiment* and *redefinition*. First, natural rights for Douglass cease to be metaphysical abstractions and instead become embodied in our social relations. While Douglass invokes philosophical ideas of rights, he emphasizes that their realization requires overcoming racialized power. While he affirms the human soul’s indestructible dignity, he argues that such dignity only acquires meaning through social recognition. And while he speaks highly of individual accountability, he writes pointedly of collective responsibility for oppression and injustice. In this way, Douglass’s stress on embodiment reconfigures and socially embeds—but does not reject—a number of core liberal and Enlightenment ideas. Unlike Marxists and like thinkers, his aim is not to argue that natural rights ideologically blind us to class-based oppression, but to propose that previous accounts miscalculate the substance of natural rights and overlook their dependence on concrete social structures. Standard natural rights formulas fall short, in other words, not because they are metaphysically false, but because they are epistemically impoverished, overly reliant for their formulation on philosophical abstractions or a narrow account of reason.⁵

⁴ I focus on this span of Douglass’s writings because it was during this time that he was writing and organizing against chattel slavery. His ideas did change in certain respects over this period, most notably in his break with William Lloyd Garrison on the question of the proper role of politics and violent resistance for realizing emancipation. For an extended discussion see Blight (2018, ch. 23). Even so, Douglass’s views of slavery’s underlying social, psychological, and normative dynamics remain largely constant.

⁵ From around the French Revolution onward, including into Douglass’s time, there were others who were also keen to supplant the more abstract tradition of natural rights with more robust accounts based on facts about their own societies, especially inequality. Douglass’s deep originality should thus be seen as part of a larger transformation of natural rights which took place over the course of

Second, Douglass covertly redefines a number of concepts that underly most natural rights theories, including freedom, reason, dignity, and moral responsibility. Even as he accepts natural rights in outline, he modifies their philosophical substance with insights drawn from his tangible experience of slavery. Even as he echoes America's founding ideals, he reinterprets those ideals to fit with his intimate knowledge of what drives actual human behavior, including dependence, domination, cruelty, and violence. Douglass, to be sure, is not transparent about this approach. Indeed redefinition may not have been his conscious aim: he claims, notably, that his writing aims merely to "relate and describe," not to "philosophize" ([1855] 2014, 86). Nonetheless, I will argue that some of Douglass's most powerful narrative *descriptions*, whatever their intent, amount to philosophical *redescriptions*.⁶ They hold important insights for political theory today.

This article has five parts, each one corresponding to a key principle or idea underpinning natural rights that Douglass embodies and re-describes. I begin by explaining why Douglass believes slavery must be seen as a distinctively malignant form of arbitrary power. Proponents of natural rights, like Locke, often used the term "slavery" to describe not only chattel slavery but also illegitimate rule more generally. For Douglass, by contrast, it is critical that chattel slavery be categorically distinguished from other varieties of servitude. I then turn to one upshot of this argument: slavery morally degrades the master as well as the slave. For Locke, a person who attempts to enslave another enters into a "state of war" with that other; for Douglass, he simultaneously makes war upon himself. Slave experience reveals that no human being can be a "possessive individual" insulated from the corrosive effects of wielding power. In the article's next part, I argue that Douglass adds nuance to the conventional natural rights view that one cannot consent to one's own domination ("voluntary servitude"). While slaves do reject the rightness of their slavery, they can still be naturalized into subjection, a position to which Douglass arrives via a novel, socially grounded stance toward reason. Douglass, I then show, extends this approach to another key Enlightenment concept: human dignity. For natural rights theorists like Locke, humanity's moral worth is a divine endowment, intrinsically bound to our individuality. For Douglass, by contrast, we owe our value not only to God but also to

interpersonal recognition, an idea he captures by depicting slavery's destruction of the Black family. Finally, I illustrate how Douglass's stress on the social also furnishes a new theory of collective moral responsibility. Douglass keeps with standard accounts of natural rights by retaining our culpability as individuals who act with free will; yet he goes beyond them in arguing that we can only fully uproot slavery's evils by broadening our focus to the larger structures and systems in which our choices are made.

This article's methodology is somewhat atypical among studies of Douglass in so far as it does not primarily aim to situate his thought in context, but rather to place his ideas into normative and conceptual dialogue with other thinkers and theories. This dialogue faces both backward and forward, engaging at times with figures who preceded Douglass and at others with those who came after. Certainly, any adequate reading of Douglass must be mindful of his political and ideological backdrop. He was first and foremost an activist, not a philosopher; he had well-defined political aims, slave abolition foremost among them. It must also attend to his intellectual milieu: From the import he assigns to his youthful readings of the *Columbian Orator*, for example, we know that many of the philosophical concepts cited here were known to him and helped shape his worldview (Bingham [1797] 1998; Douglass [1845] 2016, 65–7).⁷ Still, many of the issues Douglass addressed are perennial to human politics and society, matters of enduring debate. Consequently, this article, while attentive to historical context, summons intellectual interlocutors for Douglass based on a judgment of the notable voices in the broader theoretical conversation within which he can be seen as participating, rather than those he was known to have read.⁸ It aims to contribute, in modesty, to further strengthening Douglass's already canonical status in this conversation.

Douglass believes that natural rights, to have more than rhetorical force, must be embodied in concrete social structures and power relations. He fills the vacuum of an idealized Enlightenment philosophy—not to undermine the Enlightenment, but to allow for the United States to live up to its principles and redeem itself from the moral hypocrisy of slavery. In doing so, he develops a political theory designed to both redefine and reinforce liberalism's bare foundations with the social insights of the oppressed. He offers a philosophy of natural rights, told from below.

the nineteenth century. For a classic account of this transformation in the context of the birth of revolutionary and socialist thought, see Wilson ([1940] 2012). At the same time, part of what sets Douglass apart in this context is that he remains ontologically committed to the existence, universality, and morally binding power of natural rights. Natural rights are moral truths grounded in human nature, not merely "social experiments" in the way that philosophical pragmatists might claim (Buccola 2012, 36–7).

⁶ For the classic study of redescription as found in the thought of Thomas Hobbes, see Skinner (1996), especially chapter 4. For an analysis of both the hegemonic and potentially democratic uses of redescription in Hobbes, see Lesch (2023). Douglass importantly differs from Hobbes, however, in accomplishing his redescriptions primarily through bibliographic narrative.

⁷ As Blight (2018, 44) has noted, Douglass's reading of the *Columbian Orator* exposed him to many of the key ideas of Enlightenment political thought, including "freedom," "liberty," "tyranny," and "the rights of man."

⁸ Locke's words and ideas will often speak for natural rights ideas in this article, given what is known about his profound impact on American political thought. Even so, my aim is not to map the precise influence of Locke's texts on Douglass, but rather to show how the latter engaged with natural rights concepts embedded in his period's intellectual-political culture which are traceable, in many cases, to Locke.

SLAVERY AS A UNIQUELY EVIL FORM OF ARBITRARY POWER: DOMINATION AND DEHUMANIZATION

While the term “natural rights” encompasses a family of Enlightenment-era philosophies, a widely shared idea was freedom from arbitrary power and, by extension, the unlawfulness of slavery.⁹ “Freedom from Absolute, Arbitrary power, is so necessary to, and closely joined with a Man’s Preservation,” writes Locke, “that he cannot part with it, but by what forfeits his Preservation and Life together” ([1689] 2008, ch. 4, §23). Douglass of course shared Locke’s philosophical opposition to slavery. To hand oneself over fully to the control of another violates one’s inalienable right to freedom. At the same time, Douglass sought to evince, in vivid and raw detail, how such violations tore away at bodies and souls—not only the slave’s but the master’s as well. He wanted his readers and listeners—mostly white, and accustomed to an abstract discourse of rights—to gain some inkling of slavery’s moral degradation. “I now saw in my situation,” Douglass writes of this dynamic, “several points of similarity with that of the oxen. They were property, so was I; they were to be broken, so was I. [My overseer] Covey was to break me, I was to break them; break and be broken—such is life” ([1855] 2014, 170). For Douglass, such degradation has two core elements: domination, the experience of being wholly under another’s power; and dehumanization, the reduction of human existence to its merely animalistic aspects. Embodying these elements via slave narratives allows Douglass to clarify their conceptual relationship. It also helps him redefine the meaning of “slavery” in natural rights philosophy, marking chattel slavery as distinct from, and distinctively worse than, all other forms of unjust subservience, including political domination, hereditary hierarchy, and industrialized wage labor.

Among Douglass’s aims, especially in his autobiographies, is to help white Americans apprehend (to the extent possible) the slave experience of racial domination, to elicit how what Locke called “arbitrary power” is actually felt from the victim’s point of view ([1689] 2008, ch. 4, §23). On a physical level, slaves cede total control over their time and bodies. All normal human distinctions vanish, and labor—or its transitory absence—becomes the only relevant marker:

Very many of their sleeping hours are consumed in preparing the field for the coming day; and when this is done, old and young, male and female, married and single, drop down side by side...and here they sleep till they are summoned to the field by the driver’s horn....There must be no halting; every one must be at his or her post; and woe betides them who hear not this morning summons to the field. (Douglass [1845] 2016, 47)

⁹ There was a small but significant tradition of natural rights which argued for its compatibility with slavery, as evidenced for example by the words of Alberico Gentili ([1598] 1933, 118): “Liberty is according to nature, but only for good men.”

On a psychological level, slaves must cultivate a dark form of empathy. To avoid the lash, they must train themselves to anticipate the whims and wishes of their masters:

A mere look, word, or motion,—a mistake, accident, or want of power,—are all matters for which a slave may be whipped at any time. Does a slave look dissatisfied? It is said, he has the devil in him, and must be whipped out. Does he speak loudly when spoken to by his master? Then he is getting high-minded, and should be taken down a buttonhole lower. (91)

Slaves are forced to internalize the “consciousness of being whipt for no cause” ([1852] 2015, 14). They must stifle any sense of an objective right and wrong, bow to their total dependence on power, and accept the utter caprice of their master’s will. Here, for example, is how Douglass describes the reaction of a slave named Barney, falsely accused of some minor mistake: “Listening to complaints, however groundless, Barney must stand, hat in hand, lips sealed, never answering a word. He must make no reply, no explanation; the judgment of the master must be deemed infallible, for his power is absolute and irresponsible” ([1855] 2014, 92).

Slaves’ domination is necessarily accompanied, for Douglass, by their dehumanization, which likewise has both material and nonmaterial dimensions. On the one hand, slavery reduces human beings to their mere physicality; it assumes nothing of them beyond creaturely needs and desires and consigns them to rule by the stronger. “What an assemblage!” Douglass exclaims, describing a slave auction, “Moral and intellectual beings, in open contempt of their humanity, leveled at a blow with horses, sheep horned cattle, and swine!” ([1855] 2014, 142). Douglass invokes the swine metaphor again in illustrating the conditions of meal time as a child:

[Mush] was put into a large wooden tray or trough, and set down upon the ground. The children were then called, like so many pigs, and like so many pigs they would come and devour the mush; some with oyster-shells, others with pieces of shingle, some with naked hands, and none with spoons. He that ate fastest got most; he that was strongest secured the best place; and few left the trough satisfied. ([1845] 2016, 58)

On the other hand, Douglass emphasizes slavery’s psychological dimensions, or what Buccola calls its “metaphysical cruelty” (2012, 26). It actively strips individuals of the norms, affections, and institutions that define their humanity. Children—“that they might early be without ties of kindred”—are systematically and forcibly separated from their mothers (Douglass [1844] 1979). Female slaves are often raped, bestowing on owners a “double relation of master and father” ([1845] 2016, 42). And the elderly, having outgrown their utility, are “turned out” from the community, consigned to loneliness, isolation and near-certain death ([1844] 1979). Douglass summarizes the situation

tersely: “behold a man transformed into a brute!” ([1845] 2016, 81).

Describing slavery's domination and dehumanization allows Douglass to embody the content of natural rights ideas which, left to philosophy alone, would remain overly abstract. Beyond this aim, I now show, Douglass also quietly amends those ideas. In particular, he overturns the standard way that philosophy conceives of the relationship between dehumanization and domination.

Typically, dehumanization is seen as the cause of domination: a person deprived of human status can be more readily subjected to arbitrary power; human rights require “human” beings.¹⁰ Douglass is not averse to moral abstractions; he frequently invokes the “common humanity” of whites and Blacks, for instance ([1857] 1986a). Yet to analyze dehumanization in such ideational terms, he suggests, misapprehends its basic psychological dynamic. It confuses cause and effect: white slave owners do not usually start out by seeing their Black slaves as less than human; they dehumanize them *only as they become accustomed to dominating them*. Dehumanization, in other words, does not (usually) lead to domination, but just the opposite: domination, counterintuitively, leads to dehumanization. Depriving Black slaves of their humanity offered a way for masters to rationalize their oppressive behaviors after the fact. It justified their economic stake in slavery.

On this point, Douglass anticipates W. E. B. Du Bois's arguments in his landmark *Black Reconstruction in America*. Du Bois points out that white slave owners had every material incentive to keep slavery going; it was in their clear economic interest. But how, morally, could they account for freed Blacks? After all, these were people who lived and worked and thought and had families just like whites (to the extent they were permitted to do so). How could slave owners get around America's belief, or professed belief, in human equality? Wasn't slavery an affront to the Declaration of Independence? The answer, explains Du Bois, was to deny slaves' humanity. For economic reasons, slaves *had* to cease to be human beings (Du Bois 1935, ch. 1). It was necessary for their personhood to be negated. Domination was the *cause*; dehumanization was the *effect*.

¹⁰ The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, for example, argues that the Final Solution was enabled by a psychological process in which the “very humanity” of Jews was rendered “invisible” to Germans (1989, 26). Likewise, the philosopher Jonathan Glover (2012) shows that soldiers become capable of committing atrocities by “hardening” their ethical epistemology, ceasing to see their victims as fully human. For an extended analysis of the relationship between dependence, domination, and dehumanization in the history of philosophy and political thought, see my *Solidarity in a Secular Age: From Political Theology to Jewish Philosophy* (2022), especially chapters 1, 4, and 6. In Douglass's day, too, many who claimed fidelity to natural rights often justified slavery by denying African Americans' humanity: no human beings, no rights. By law, slaves were considered chattel in the antebellum South, in most respects indistinguishable from animals. For more on slavery's property codes, see Du Bois (1935, ch. 1) and Best (2004).

Douglass marshals this novel understanding of dehumanization to sharply distinguish American slavery from other forms of political and economic servitude, redefining natural rights doctrine in the process. Locke opens his *First Treatise* by declaring that “Slavery is so vile and miserable an estate of man” ([1689] 2008, Book 1, ch. 1, §1). But what *is* slavery, for Locke? Against readers who believe Locke supported chattel slavery, Holly Brewer has shown that such arguments find little textual or historical support.¹¹ At the same time, it is true that Locke's rejection of the practice grew out of the same normative trunk as his philosophical opposition to certain forms of power more generally, including hereditary hierarchy, indentured servitude, and the subjugation of white Englishmen to arbitrary rule. He often used the term slavery interchangeably to describe each of these varieties of oppression. Thus for Locke, Brewer explains, “James II's efforts to strip his subjects of rights grew from his absolutism, which made all subjects into slaves; such slavery was part of a continuum that ended in slavery in the Americas” (2017, 1054–5).

Likewise, some thinkers in Douglass's time extrapolated from what they took to be Locke's own or implied views in order to equate economic subjugation with chattel slavery. Among Locke's most dramatic claims, in his *Second Treatise*, was that humanity's moral worth can be put in terms of a concept of property: just as we rightfully acquire the things we make, God, our maker, acquired us; and because human beings are God's property, we are not at liberty to destroy others or ourselves ([1689] 2008, ch. 2, §6). To be clear, there is no evidence that Locke himself reduced a human being's value to his labor value. Quite the contrary, he repeatedly insists that “all men by nature are equal,” further elaborating that this refers to the “equality, which all men are in, in respect to jurisdiction or dominion one over another” (ch. 6, §54). Even so, the rhetorical connection Locke drew between property and human nature helped inspire efforts by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Karl Marx, and other Left thinkers of the nineteenth-century to envision a continuum of oppression between slave and capitalist economies (Marx [1863] 2000; Proudhon [1840] 1994). If human beings are essentially defined by their labor value, such thinkers proposed, then members of the industrial working class are “wage slaves”: Although free in principle, they are effectively “bound,” like slaves, by their long hours, low wages, dismal conditions, and limited alternatives.¹²

Douglass also opposes forms of arbitrary political rule and unjust hierarchy, and he agrees that the labor situation of poor whites in Northern factories is deeply

¹¹ Brewer (2017) cites C. B. Macpherson (1962) and Orlando Patterson (1991) as two notable proponents of the thesis that Locke supported chattel slavery.

¹² The concept of “wage slavery” was also used by slavery's apologists, who argued that Northern labor conditions were comparable or worse (Foner [1970] 1995, preface; Du Bois 1935, 9). For more on Douglass's objections to equating such labor conditions with slavery, see Blight (2018, 174).

exploitative; yet he vehemently rejects that they belong in the same category as Black chattel slavery. What is most essential to our nature, he writes, is not the “property in man.” It is our capacity for rational thought and choice, those qualities which distinguish us from other animals. Thus while wage labor may unjustly deprive “one right or property in man,” slavery takes “man himself.” It “dooms him a degraded thing, ranks him with the bridled horses and muzzled ox, makes him a cattle personal, a marketable commodity” (Douglass [1845] 1979). Slavery’s distinctive evil is its dehumanization. It not only deprives us of some abstract right, or binds us within an unmerited hierarchy, or forces us to bow to an illegitimate ruler. It is an ontological violation. It is an affront to our very nature. “The Irishman is poor,” Douglass concludes, “but he is not a slave. He may be in rags, but he is not a slave” ([1855] 2014, 359).¹³

Douglass, in sum, wants to emphasize that slavery is a uniquely evil form of arbitrary power. Real, chattel slavery—not political domination, not economic subservience—must be reserved a special place in the philosophy of natural rights. To make this claim, he offers vivid illustrations of two of slavery’s core elements: domination and dehumanization. And he contends, further, that the standard way of thinking about their interrelation is incorrect. Most of the time, domination is not the product of dehumanization, but its cause. We enslave others and then deprive them of their humanity. From here, we can see Douglass’s rhetorical–conceptual method at work: by narrating the experiences of slavery’s victims, he can embody, and subtly redefine, a key principle behind natural rights philosophy.

SLAVERY’S SELF-DEFEATING EFFECTS: RECIPROCAL MORAL DEGRADATION

Douglass also employs techniques of embodiment and redefinition to recast the act of enslavement itself, illustrating that slavery’s moral degradation is not confined to the slave. In the *Second Treatise*, Locke famously compares a person who attempts to enslave another to a “wild beast, or noxious brute,” a creature who has “quitted reason, which God hath given to be the rule betwixt man and man, and the common bond whereby human kind is united into one fellowship and society” ([1689] 2008, ch. 15, §172). Consequently, just as one may rightfully defend himself against a “lion or a tyger,” so too can a person rightly resist an aggressor, including with violence (ch. 2, §11). “He who makes an attempt to enslave me,” Locke summarizes, “thereby puts himself into a state of war with me” (ch. 3, §17). Douglass likewise believes that slavery amounts to a “state of war.” Simultaneously, he goes beyond Locke in describing enslavement’s brutalizing effects. While

Locke compares slavers to animals in order to normatively justify resistance, Douglass suggests that slavers are bestial not only in a metaphorical sense but also because of their profound psychological disfigurement. Dehumanization cuts two ways: in the same stroke that the master denies the humanity of his slave, he thereby degrades his own. Douglass certainly intends no equivalence between oppressed and oppressor. The slave’s fate is uniquely, and unqualifiedly, evil. Still—and bearing in mind his target audience—he wants to suggest that the “brutalizing effects of slavery” pose a problem for white citizens as well (Douglass [1845] 2016, 70). From the perspective of natural rights, slavery should be seen not only as wrong, but as self-annihilating; it deadens the soul of the master too.

Slavery dehumanizes the master most directly by hardening his natural affection. The default reaction of most people to another’s suffering, Douglass argues, is sympathy—a desire to alleviate that other’s pain, or at least to provide him with comfort. The master-slave relation suppresses this reaction, substituting harshness and anger in its place. Douglass’s most dramatic example is Sophia Auld, a white woman who, alongside her husband, became his master in Baltimore:

When I went there, she was a pious, warm, and tender-hearted woman...Slavery soon proved its ability to divest her of these heavenly qualities. Under its influence, the tender heart became stone, and the lamblike disposition gave way to tiger-like fierceness. (Douglass [1845] 2016, 64)

Slavery injects what Douglass calls the “fatal poison of irresponsible power” into our interpersonal behavior (62). Having related to another as a mere object of our will, and encountering no barrier to doing so, we come to conceive of all social experience in the same way. This was Auld’s fate: granted arbitrary power, a woman who Douglass describes as “preserved from the blighting and dehumanizing effects of slavery,” someone who treated him “as she supposed one human being ought to treat another,” was disfigured into a “demon,” her face “red with rage,” and her voice filled with “harsh and horrid discord.” “Slavery,” he concludes, “proved as injurious to her as it did to me” (61–4).

At the same time, Douglass argues that slavery’s dehumanizing effects do not remain confined to the master–slave relation, but inevitably contaminate our relationships more generally. Sophia Auld, he explains, did not embrace her role as master. She came to oppress slaves only reluctantly, and only on the orders of her husband. But as Douglass points out, this is itself highly revealing: dominated by the gender hierarchies of her day, Sophia was forced to redefine her own relationships in similarly hierarchical terms. She was, in effect, compelled to compel others. Such a dynamic, Douglass argues, permeates the South’s entire social structure. Power—who has more, who has less, and in what domains—is the only relevant factor in relating to others. Domination tinges every human relationship,

¹³ For a valuable overview of how Douglass defines slavery, see Buccola (2012, 16–9).

whether public or private, political or familial, class or race-based. Human connections are seen through the prism of dependence, advantage, and fear (Douglass [1855] 2014, 53).

One example Douglass offers is white labor. On face, one might expect that Southern white workers would join forces with Black slaves, uniting against the ruling aristocracy to push for economic and political reform. In fact, the opposite was the case. Most commonly, white laborers were openly hostile toward Blacks, both enslaved and free. Why? One reason was economic: white workers refused solidarity with freed blacks because they were concerned about competition (Du Bois 1935, ch. 2). Douglass also offers a second, more subtle, but arguably more important reason: poor whites feared Black equality because it threatened their social position. It endangered their place in the public hierarchy. However low their status might be in Southern society, poor whites could take pride in the fact that they were not the lowest of the low. They could at least claim superiority—and power—over one other class of people. They could still hold the whip, often literally, over their Black neighbors. “The impression is cunningly made,” Douglass writes, “that slavery is the only power that can prevent the laboring white man from falling to the level of the slave’s poverty and degradation. To make this enmity deep and broad, between the slave and the poor white man, the latter is allowed to abuse and whip the former, without hindrance” ([1855] 2014, 247). This was the situation in the South. But as Du Bois would later show, a similar dynamic took shape in the North. As the labor leader John Campbell declared in 1851:

Will the white race ever agree that blacks shall stand beside us on election day, upon the rostrum, in the ranks of the army, in our places of amusement, in places of public worship, ride in the same coaches, railway cars, or steamships? Never! Never! (Du Bois 1935, 22)

In a social structure defined entirely by power, all that matters is one’s ability to dominate others.

Domination, moreover, can quickly become an end in itself. Douglass frequently observes his masters’ sadistic gratification in exercising power through a combination of fear and psychological coercion. As he writes about his sometime master Captain Anthony, “He would at times seem to take great pleasure in whipping a slave....No words, no tears, no prayers, from his gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose” (Douglass [1845] 2016, 44).¹⁴ Slaves were sometimes sold further South—where conditions were known to be harsher—not for lack of suitable local buyers, but out of “revenge,” a desire to punish the supposedly impudent (Douglass [1852] 2015, 221). “A single word” at a slave auction, Douglass

explains, was sufficient to “sunder forever the dearest friends, dearest kindred, and strongest ties known to human beings” ([1845] 2016, 70). More often, however, power was expressed more directly. There was an ever-present possibility of an explosion of brutal violence: “I have often been awakened at the dawn of a day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom he used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood” (Douglass [1845] 2016, 44).

Here, then, is a second way in which Douglass embodies and subtly redefines key features of natural rights philosophy. Slavery, for Douglass as for Locke, is certainly a “state of war.” Yet it is also a form of reciprocal moral degradation, brutalizing masters as well as slaves. As Douglass illustrates, in a social structure defined entirely by power, all that comes to matter is one’s power over others. We are given the false impression that domination is the highest, or perhaps only, good. Other forms of relating to others, like sympathy, reciprocity, or obligation, fall by the wayside. Not only the slave’s humanity, but the master’s too, is corroded. Or as Douglass himself concludes: “Everybody, in the south, wants the privilege of whipping somebody” ([1855] 2014, 59).

In this way, Douglass’s description of slavery’s dynamics also gives the lie to the idea, sometimes attributed to Enlightenment thought, that the human being is a sovereign self or “possessive individual” (Macpherson 1962). It is certainly true, as Buccola and others have noted, that Douglass was a strong proponent of the Lockean idea of “self-ownership,” and he often deployed it in speeches to make the case for abolition (Buccola 2012, ch. 2). Nonetheless, Douglass shows through his slave narratives that such ownership does not psychologically insulate us from the effects of our actions. We are not, nor can we be, imperious masters of our reality. We cannot simply impose our will on the world, and on others in it, without consequences for ourselves. In truth, the world pushes back. When we attempt to dominate others, it leaves a mark on our souls.

AGAINST THE “HAPPY SLAVE”: COMPLICATING AND CONTEXTUALIZING REASON

Douglass, as we have seen, vividly depicts slavery’s cruelties to make palpable the institution’s mutual moral degradation, reconfiguring elements of natural rights philosophy in the process. At the same time, he knows that such depictions introduce a potential danger. In philosophical principle, natural rights are universal and inalienable, applying to all human beings, at all times. They cannot be discarded even by their possessors. In practice, the scope of natural rights was often narrowed through caveats and exceptions. Locke, for instance, argued that children can be rightly coerced by their parents because of their undeveloped rational faculties: “No Body can be under a Law which is not promulgated to him; and this Law being promulgated

¹⁴ Douglass observes something similar from the overseer William Sevier: “He seemed to take pleasure in manifesting his fiendish barbarity” ([1845] 2016, 47).

or made known by *Reason* only, he that is not come to the Use of his *Reason*, cannot be said to be *under this law*" ([1689] 2008, ch. 6, §57, emphasis in original). As Du Bois would later observe, slavery's ideological defenders sometimes mobilized a version of Locke's logic for their own purposes. "[Black slaves]," Du Bois writes in the voice of the pro-slavery advocate, "were congenital wards and children, to be well-treated and cared for, but far happier and safer here than in their own land" (1935, 5). Slavery, by this view, could be justified as a form of paternalism—an improvement on blacks' purportedly "savage" condition in Africa. The master's power could cease to be "arbitrary." And the systematic domination of an entire race of people could (ostensibly) be reconciled with an expressed commitment to individual rights and liberties.

For Douglass, then, the risk of revealing racial domination's totalizing nature is that it might reinforce the widespread myth that Black slaves, by largely eschewing physical resistance, were rationally undeveloped. It might suggest that denying them the exercise of their natural rights was justified. It might corroborate the so-called "happy slave" hypothesis: the idea, often ascribed to Marx, that a subaltern's outward subservience implies his inner acquiescence, that the dominated accept the terms of their domination. For Douglass, it might suggest the unthinkable: slaves consent to their slavery.¹⁵

To fend off this possibility, Douglass uses techniques of embodiment and redescription to develop a nuanced model of slave psychology. According to standard accounts of natural rights, it is impossible to voluntarily renounce one's freedom. "A man," Locke declares, "cannot subject himself to the arbitrary power of another" ([1689] 2008, ch. 11, §135). Douglass agrees: as a general rule, slaves strongly chafe against domination; there are not, nor can there be, "happy slaves." Nonetheless, Douglass uses his narrative depictions to subtly complicate the standard natural rights account, demonstrating that in limited circumstances, and with sufficient repression, slaves can be acclimated to their subjugation and so prevented from asserting their natural rights. The key to Douglass's argument is a novel, intersubjective understanding of the Enlightenment's most important concept: human reason. Reason, Douglass proposes, is never given its finished form by nature. It is instead susceptible to context, capable of being either nurtured or suppressed by its attending social conditions.

On the one hand, Douglass adds nuance to Locke's account of subjection to arbitrary power, suggesting that human beings can be naturalized into systems of oppression. Slaves' servile dispositions and attitudes are habituated from birth, becoming an integral and unnoticed part of their self-conception. They not only

regulate their behavior but also define their very sense of self and place in the world. As he writes of his childhood, for example: "I was a SLAVE—born a slave—and though the fact was incomprehensible to me, it conveyed to my mind a sense of my entire dependence on the will of *somebody* I had never seen" (Douglass [1855] 2014, 39). In his telling, he only truly awakened to his oppression after repeated stays in cosmopolitan Baltimore (258–60).

Likewise, Douglass is highly critical of his slave peers who choose to spend their Christmas holiday in games and carousal, strongly implying that they have been successfully mollified by their masters. Slaves, Douglass argues, interpreted such permissiveness as "liberty" because they had never experienced the genuine article. Consequently, a few days of "brutal drunkenness" and "revolting dissipation" would cool their desire for freedom. They would be almost relieved to return to work: "Feeling, upon the whole, rather glad to go from that which our masters artfully deceived us into the belief was freedom, back to the arms of slavery....It was about as well to be a slave to *master*, as to be a slave to *rum* and *whisky*" (204–5). Such institutions, Douglass stresses, were not merely clever psychological tricks which would fade quickly over time. They were structural features of slavery, "conductors or safety valves to carry off the explosive elements inseparable from the human mind, when reduced to the condition of slavery." They had profound social and political implications, helping to buttress the whole slave system. "Were slaveholders at once to abandon the practice of allowing their slaves these liberties," Douglass avers, "I doubt not that the south would blaze with insurrections" (203).

On the other hand, Douglass insists that slaves, despite appearances, have not accepted their bondage. They might *perform* deference and non-resistance in what James C. Scott has termed their "public transcript," those elements of their behavior which are knowable to outsiders. But in what Scott called their "hidden transcript"—spaces shielded from their master's gaze—they voice the deep injustice of their condition (Scott 1990).

An important example Douglass cites are slave songs. According to Marxian proponents of voluntary servitude, such songs would likely exemplify religion's hegemonic function. They would be "sigh[s] of the oppressed creature," which means by which human beings, in the face of seemingly hopeless oppression, imbue that oppression with a spiritual meaning and purpose (Marx [1843] 1978). They would be evidence, in other words, of false consciousness. Douglass vehemently rejects this view. Far from proving that slaves are happy with their lot, slave songs keep alive a spirit of resistance. They signal that slaves are profoundly aware of their subjugated condition and earnestly hope to be free. "Every tone," Douglass writes, "was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains" ([1845] 2016, 50). He cites one song in particular which speaks to this sense of injustice in remarkably candid terms:

¹⁵ While the "happy slave" idea is most often associated with Marx, Engels, and the theory of "false consciousness" in subsequent Marxist thought, it can be traced at least back to Étienne de La Boétie's *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude* ([1577] 2012). For a critical study of the concept and its history, see Rosen (1996).

We raise de wheat,
 Dey gib us de corn;
 We bake de bread,
 Dey gib us de cruss;
 We sif de meal,
 Dey gib us de huss;
 We peal de meat,
 Dey gib us de skin,
 And dat's de way
 Dey takes us in.
 We skim de pot,
 Dey gib us the liquor,
 And say dat's good enough for n---er.
 Walk over! walk over!
 Tom butter and de fat;
 Poor n---er you can't get over dat;
 Walk over!
 (Douglass [1855] 2014, 202, see also 80, 222)

Slave songs, Douglass concludes, make a more compelling case that slaves are entitled to natural rights than could ever be made at the level of reasoned argument. Rather than working downward from axiomatic assertions about human nature—axioms which, as we have seen, were often contested by slave owners—they work upward from shared, embodied human experience. In witnessing others join their voices in a solidarity of suffering and hope we hear an echo of our own pain and aspiration. “I have sometimes thought,” Douglass muses, “that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do” ([1845] 2016, 50). Indeed for Douglass, the fact that slaves sing, rather than openly challenge their masters and so risk life and limb, gives further evidence of their shared humanity. Why, Douglass asks, should we expect slaves to attempt revolt and almost certainly die? Instead, they do what any other human being would do under conditions of abject powerlessness: “[Slaves] suppress the truth rather than take the consequences of telling it, and in so doing prove themselves a part of the human family” (53; Scott 1990, 78–9).

In western philosophy, music has often been distinguished from reason; yet for Douglass, one of the most crucial effects of songs for slaves was precisely to elevate their rational consciousness.¹⁶ Thus by illustrating the role of music for reason—not in the abstract, but in embodied practice—Douglass covertly redefines one of the elementary features of natural rights. When slaves sing about their condition, he argues, they nurture and sustain critical faculties which might otherwise have been smothered by oppression:

To make a contented slave it is necessary to make a thoughtless one. It is necessary to darken his moral and mental vision, and, as far as possible, to annihilate the power of reason. He must be able to detect no consistencies in slavery; he must be made to feel that slavery is right. (Douglass [1845] 2016, 103–4)

Subjugation becomes naturalized when the slave system comes to appear as inevitable, objective, and immutable.¹⁷ Slave songs shatter this order. They expose slavery's actual inconsistencies and contradictions. They offer slaves a means to raise and sustain awareness of their oppression and its basic injustice. They allow them to reassert their reason and humanity—their “thinking powers”—in the face of systematic dehumanization, without risking their masters' ire (Douglass [1846] 1979).

THE SOCIAL FOUNDATIONS OF HUMAN DIGNITY: RECOGNITION, IDENTITY, AND THE FAMILY

By embodying and redefining human reason, Douglass adds nuance to standard natural rights accounts of arbitrary power. I now turn to an idea that is often coupled with reason in Enlightenment thought and is similarly reconfigured by Douglass: human dignity. That human beings have a moral worth which must be respected, protected, and preserved, both by states and other people, was for many of Douglass's intellectual predecessors a fundamental normative proposition. “Men being all the workmanship of one omnipotent and infinitely wise maker,” Locke writes, it follows that each person “is bound to preserve himself, and...as much as he can, to preserve the rest of mankind” ([1689] 2008, ch. 2, §6).¹⁸ Or as Kant declares, in a well-known passage from his *Metaphysics of Morals*: “A human being is exalted above any price... he is not to be valued merely as a means to the ends of others or even to his own ends, but as an end in himself, that is, he possesses a *dignity* (an absolute inner worth)” ([1797] 1998, 186). Douglass would not disagree. The concept of human dignity threads through his writings and speeches, underlying his attacks on slavery and animating his vision for a more just and equal future (Buccola 2015). Yet even as he adopts this most basic Enlightenment concept, Douglass, painfully aware of how deeply, widely, and easily it is violated in practice, seeks to subtly shift its meaning through techniques of embodiment and redescription. Nesting philosophical

¹⁶ See for example Davis (2019), who, while critiquing this traditional contrast, roots it in the identification of philosophy with the medium of *logos* and truths that can be formulated in logical speech. It should be noted, however, that Plato (1991) saw music (of a kind) as complementing reason: a way of imitating the music of the spheres—in audible, and structured mathematically—and making sensorially accessible the intelligible order of the universe.

¹⁷ Compare Vaclav Havel's analysis of Soviet totalitarianism, where the whole “panorama” of daily experience has an appearance of seamlessness, of a “metaphysical order binding all its components together” (1985, 31–5).

¹⁸ While Locke affirmed ideas which we today associate with “human dignity,” in his time the term itself was not yet commonly linked with this meaning, but instead with honor, rank, and social position. Our contemporary of definition dignity as something like “intrinsic moral worth” is traceable instead to Immanuel Kant. For an extended discussion, see Rosen (2012).

observations into depictions of slavery's effects on Black families—others and his own—he contributes a layer of social depth to conventional natural rights accounts. Even if all people have a divinely endowed dignity, in practice such dignity is not intrinsically given. It must be instantiated in our concrete relations with others, constructed and reaffirmed by interpersonal recognition.

For Douglass, an important way masters denied their slaves dignity was by destroying their families. Familial relations, he emphasizes, are not only an outgrowth of our moral worth; they help to constitute it. The relations of commitment, obligation, and love that we develop within the family nurture what makes us distinct as a species, providing the “strongest ties known to human beings” (Douglass [1845] 2016, 70). Seeking to deny that humanity, therefore, owners had to do more than deny slaves dignity in an abstract sense. To yield a “humanity converted into merchandise,” they had to actively eliminate our most essential of human relationships (Douglass [1852] 2015, 215–6). Here, for instance, is how Douglass recounts the words of an overseer driving a slave-gang to market:

“I say, gal, what in the devil are you crying about?” said one of [the overseers]. “I’ll give you something to cry about, if you don’t mind.” This was said to a girl, apparently not more than twelve years old, who had been weeping bitterly. She had, probably, left behind her a loving mother, affectionate sisters, brothers, and friends, and her tears were but the natural expression of her sorrow, and the only solace. But the dealers in human flesh have no respect for such sorrow. They look upon it as a protest against their cruel injustice, and they are prompt to punish it. (218)

Sundering children from parents was as much a tactic for denying dignity as an outgrowth of such denial. Legally designated paternity, Douglass observes with bitter irony, was likewise refused to the enslaved: “Genealogical trees do not flourish among slaves. A person of some consequence here in the north, sometimes designated *father*, is literally abolished in slave law and slave practice” ([1855] 2014, 30).

Such laws, Douglass stresses, did more than codify Blacks as chattel; they deprived slaves of family life, their earliest cradle of recognition and identity. “The grand aim of slavery,” Douglass concludes, referring to this shattering of family life, “is to reduce man to a level with the brute” ([1855] 2014, 32). The family’s vital import for Douglass lies not in blood ties but in social ones, not in material subsistence but in the formation of personhood. It offers the site where we gain our earliest cognizance that there exist others, separate from ourselves, to whom we owe respect and affection. It is that intimate pocket of life in which budding subjectivities start to grow into full human beings—precisely the dynamic that slavery seeks to stifle: “A successful method of obliterating from the mind and heart of the slave, all just ideas of the sacredness of *the family*, as in institution” (32). This was why children had to be separated from their

parents. As Douglass writes of his long-estranged brothers and sisters, “I really did not understand what they were to me, or I to them. We were brothers and sisters, but what of that? Why should they be attached to me, or I to them? Brothers and sisters we were by blood; but *slavery* had made us strangers” (41). Or as he recalls of one fleeting moment when his mother intervened to rescue him from an abusive supervisor: “That night I learned the fact, that I was not only a child, but *somebody’s* child” (47).

Douglass’s most powerful—and in his eyes essential—example of how slavery destroys dignity depicts the fate of his grandmother. Douglass initially recounts this story in his first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. But in a sign of its centrality for his thought, he quotes it in full, and without modification, in his second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*. In both cases, the narrative is bookended by visceral descriptions of slavery’s physical barbarities: whippings, beatings, and starvations. Yet for Douglass, these cruelties, even in their depraved depths, do not elicit from him the same “unutterable loathing” of slavery and slaveholders as his grandmother’s seemingly more benign fate:

[My grandmother] had served my old master faithfully from youth to old age....She had rocked him in infancy, attended him in childhood, served him through life, and at his death wiped from his icy brow the cold death-sweat, and closed his eyes forever. She was nevertheless left a slave—a slave for life—a slave in the hands of strangers; and in their hands she saw her children, her grandchildren, and her great-grandchildren, divided, like so many sheep, without being gratified with the small privilege of a single word, as to their or her own destiny....They took her to the wood, built her a little hut, put up a little mud-chimney, and then made her welcome to the privilege of supporting herself in perfect loneliness; thus virtually turning her out to die! If my poor old grandmother now lives, she lives to suffer in utter loneliness; she lives to remember and mourn over the loss of grandchildren, and the loss of great-grandchildren. ([1845] 2016, 71–2; [1855] 2014, 145–7)

Douglass’s grandmother has been provided with a kind of slave’s pension: a house of her own. Though denied her liberty, she has her life and (meager) property. Yet the problem, for Douglass, is not merely that she has been stripped of one of her natural rights. The problem is with natural rights itself as conventionally understood. Even setting aside her unfreedom, Douglass stresses, his grandmother’s life has been rendered nearly inhuman. Abandoned to loneliness and isolation, the “necessities” she has been granted reflect a bare, abstract, and atomistic understanding of personhood.

This is Douglass’s broader point: our liberty, property, and lives are not enough if we are forced to spend those lives alone. It is true that Douglass often stressed the importance of individuality and principles of what came to be called classical liberalism. As Myers notes, “Self-Made Men” was for decades his most popular speech, with themes and phrases rhetorically continuous

with Lockean ideas of self-ownership (2008, 114). Yet to insist on these abstractions alone, for Douglass, would be to crop the complete image of humanity. Full, embodied human beings are enmeshed in meaningful ties with others. As Buccola has eloquently put it, Douglass was deeply “cognizant of the vulnerability of individuals in isolation,” aware of “the myriad ways in which human beings need one another to survive and flourish” (2012, 9). Contra an important stand of Enlightenment thought, we are not, nor can we be, Robinson Crusoes.¹⁹ Slavery has forced upon Douglass’s grandmother—and countless others—an impoverished form of humanity:

The heart is desolate. The children, the unconscious children, who once sang and danced in her presence, are gone. All is gloom. The grave is at the door....My poor old grandmother, the devoted mother of twelve children, is left all alone, in yonder little hut, before a few dim embers. She stands—she sits—she staggers—she falls—she groans—she dies—and there are none of her children or grandchildren present to wipe from her brow the cold sweat of death, or to place beneath the sod her fallen remains. (Douglass [1845] 2016, 72–3)

Slavery is evil not only because it wreaks violence, deprivation, and humiliation. It is evil not only because it kills. It is also evil because it inflicts what Orlando Patterson calls “social death” (1982). At the same time that Douglass’s grandmother has been deprived of her physical needs—a fact that should not be understated—she has also been deprived of her psychological needs. She has been torn from those webs of recognition that make us who we are—first and foremost, those of her family. She has been made to suffer an inhumanity not only of body but of soul.²⁰

Thus by so embodying his grandmother’s experience, Douglass subtly redefines a fundamental element of natural rights. God has granted human beings an intrinsic dignity. But such dignity only acquires tangible meaning when it is acknowledged and sustained by others in ties of mutual recognition.

“THE SLAVE OF SOCIETY AT LARGE”: COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

Embodying and redefining human dignity is one way that Douglass adds social depth to natural rights

¹⁹ In addition to *Robinson Crusoe* itself, a novel which depicts the possibility (and perhaps ideal) of economic self-sufficiency, important early modern and Enlightenment thinkers rejected the concept, traceable to Plato and Aristotle, of natural sociability: that man is by nature a “political animal” (Aristotle 1996, 1.2, 13; Plato 1991, book 2). Rousseau, with his stylized portrayal of the earliest people as isolated and prerational, was the foremost example of this trend, though he may have derived it from Hobbes, who strongly criticized Aristotle along similar lines (Rousseau [1754] 2010, part 1; Hobbes [1642] 2003, 1.5).

²⁰ As Blight notes, Douglass’s stress on dignity’s social dimensions also informed his quest for justice: he wanted slave owners to be not only destroyed, but *humiliated* (2018, 346).

accounts. An additional way is by expanding humanity’s circle of moral responsibility to encompass both individual and collective dimensions. “The state of nature,” Locke writes, “has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges every one” ([1689] 2008, ch. 2, §6). Even in the absence of society and government, for Locke, human beings are bound by moral laws. Because these laws are knowable through reason, and because we may freely choose to follow them, it follows that we can be justly punished for violating them. Douglass likewise affirms our ability to grasp the laws of nature and our free capacity to obey them; as attested by his frequent calls for divine justice, he too believes that we should be held personally accountable for our actions. Nonetheless, he implies that conventional natural rights accounts of culpability are inadequate. The experience of slavery and an analysis of its institutions demand that we refine our views. Moral responsibility is multilayered: it should be assigned to individuals *and* collectives, to people *and* societies. For Douglass, this has two important implications. First, our actions are only partly of our own making. While individuals are still responsible for their choices, their culpability is attenuated—not only that of law-breaking slaves but also, and more controversially, that of brutalizing masters. Second, we cannot eliminate slavery’s lasting effects if we focus only on individual decisions. We must also tackle the larger systems and structures in which our choices are enmeshed.

Douglass introduces the idea of collective responsibility in order to defend the slave’s right to steal from masters other than his own. A foundational premise of natural rights is that a person’s property belongs to him—not only *de facto*, but *de jure*. Consequently, property owners are entitled to defend their possessions, including with force. As Locke writes, “The great and chief end of Men’s uniting into Commonwealths, and putting themselves under Government, is the Preservation of their Property” ([1689] 2008, ch. 9, §124). Douglass agrees that theft, as a general rule, is wrong; yet the circumstances of slavery—the fact that it exists not as isolated relations of master and slave, but within a social order which actively sustains it—uproot the normative landscape. A slave should be entitled not only to take from *his* owner, but from *any* owner:

“I am,” thought I, “not only the slave of Master Thomas, but I am the slave of society at large. Society at large has bound itself, in form and in fact, to assist Master Thomas in robbing me of my rightful liberty, and of the just reward of my labor; therefore, whatever rights I have against Master Thomas, I have, equally, against those confederated with him in robbing me of liberty. As society has marked me out as privileged plunder, on the principle of self-preservation I am justified in plundering in turn. Since each slave belongs to all; all must, therefore, belong to each.” (Douglass [1855] 2014, 154)

A slave is clearly the victim of his own master. He has been denied his freedom, his body beaten, and his labor stolen. According to a standard model of natural rights, therefore, the slave should at least be entitled to just

compensation. Alternatively, as Myers argues, the “slaveholders’ claims to property were nullified by the fact that those claims were based on their expropriation by others” (2008, 55).²¹ For Douglass, however, this standard model is insufficient. To individuate culpability for slavery’s evils is to overlook the larger institutional and structural context in which masters operate. Slavery is not a mere aberration in otherwise free relations between men. It is *constitutive* of those relations. Anticipating Ira Berlin’s distinction between “societies with slaves” and “slave societies,” Douglass insists that “the morality of a *free* society can have no application to a *slave* society” (Douglass [1855] 2014, 154–5; Berlin 1998). Slaveholders, he concludes, should be held “individually and collectively responsible for all the evils which grow out of the horrid relation” (Douglass [1855] 2014, 155).

Collective moral responsibility for slavery has important consequences, foremost among them the attenuation of individual moral responsibility. This is most straightforwardly true for slaves themselves. In his novella *The Heroic Slave*, for instance, Douglass describes how Madison Washington justifies stealing from slaveowners during his escape: “During my flight, I felt myself robbed by society of all my just rights, that I was in an enemy’s land, who sought both my life and my liberty. They had transformed me into a brute, made merchandise of my body...” ([1852] 2015, 18). Douglass’s fictionalized narrative clearly echoes his biographical one, as does its normative argument. Washington has been deprived of his natural rights. Yet the guilty party was not his own master alone, but the social order *as a whole*. He was “robbed,” not by one slaveowner, but “by society”; and it was the whole society—“the combined physical force of the community”—who brutalized and commodified him (Douglass [1855] 2014, 154–5, 217).

More controversially, Douglass suggests that slavery’s systematic quality should also reduce the culpability of its oppressing agents, from owners to overseers. Remarkably, he makes this point by contextualizing the behavior of his *own* sadistic master, Captain Anthony:

[Anthony] could, when it suited him, appear to be literally insensible to the claims of humanity.... Yet he was not by nature worse than other men. Had he been brought up in a free state, surrounded by the just restraints of free society... Capt. Anthony might have been as humane a man, and every way as respectable, as many who now oppose the slave system. (Douglass [1855] 2014, 65)

At least some forms of evil, Douglass suggests, can be explained by larger social systems. Such systems play an important role in determining our actions. They shape our moral personality, for good or ill. Consequently, our culpability as individual agents can be only partial, not total. Captain Anthony was a cruel man. But he

could have been otherwise. His free choices, though important, were not dispositive. “The slaveholder,” Douglass continues, “as well as the slave, is the victim of the slave system” (66).

Douglass explains society’s influence on our behavior in two ways, one psychological, the other structural. One the one hand, slave societies stifle or silence our rationality. By positioning certain people to exercise power arbitrarily, they enable our worst emotions and instincts:

A man’s character greatly takes its hue and shape from the form and color of things about him. Under the whole heavens there is no relation more unfavorable to the development of honorable character, than that sustained by the slaveholder to the slave. Reason is imprisoned here, and passions run wild. (Douglass [1855] 2014, 66)

Douglass shares the conventional Enlightenment view that human beings should, ideally, determine their choices rationally. Yet reason, he insists, is an uncertain and fragile faculty. Contra Locke, it is not an inevitable outgrowth of our maturity—a gift of God or nature. It is subject to the circumstances of embodied, creaturely life. It must be constructed and reinforced by a civilization which tangibly respects the rights of every person. In slave societies, it is hardly permitted to develop at all.

On the other hand, Douglass sometimes explains the behavior of slavery’s agents precisely in terms of a form of rationality: that possessed by the slave system as a whole. Consider, for example, how he interprets an owner’s unwillingness to halt an overseer’s abuses:

Had the man no bowels of compassion? Was he dead to all sense of humanity? No. I think I now understand it. This treatment is part of the system, rather than a part of the man. Were slaveholders to listen to complaints of this sort against the overseers, the luxury of owning large numbers of slaves, would be impossible.... When he drives her from his presence without redress, or the hope of redress, he acts, generally, from motives of policy, rather than from a hardened nature, or from innate brutality. (Douglass [1855] 2014, 68–9)

Seen from one angle, slave societies are constituted by individual agents: masters and overseers make their own decisions; each can be held responsible for their actions. Yet from a different angle, slave societies are coherent systems, wholes which can be assigned their own reasons and interests. To operate and sustain themselves, they need their members to act not only from their limited, individuated logic, but from a *collective* one. Not only is their behavior strongly determined by larger social frameworks; such behavior fits into identifiable patterns, “common in every slaveholding community... incidental to the relation of master and slave... in all sections of slaveholding countries” (Douglass [1855] 2014, 69).²²

²¹ At the same time, Myers (2008), perhaps seeking to align Douglass more closely with natural rights as conventionally understood, overlooks the key role he assigns to collective responsibility.

²² On this point, Douglass anticipates elements of Durkheim’s structural–functionalist notion of societies as social “organisms” ([1893] 1997, e.g. 49).

Collective responsibility has important normative ramifications for Douglass as well. Douglass, as is well-known, frequently invoked ideas of divine justice—and retribution—against slaveowners. Though initially a proponent of nonviolent abolition, he eventually became one of the most vocal advocates for armed struggle and rallied support for the Union in wartime (Douglass [1862] 1985a; [1862] 1985b; [1863] 1986; [1864] 1991a; [1864] 1991b). Nonetheless, in a speech delivered in 1864—a full three years into the Civil War, a time by which the South's defense of slavery had cost the lives of hundreds of thousands of Americans—the charitable perspective of his antebellum writings remains:

I have no malice to overcome in going back among those former slaveholders. We were all parts of one great social system, only we were at the bottom and they at the top!...I shall return to them with freedom in my hand, and point to her free Constitution, and as the olive branch was a sign that the waters of the flood were retiring, so will the freedom which I shall find there be a sign that the billows of slavery are rolling back to leave the land blooming again in the purer air of Liberty and Justice. (Douglass [1864] 1991a)

Douglass's choice of Biblical metaphor is revealing. The Bible contains no shortage of references to masters and slaves. White southerners could easily have been cast as Pharaoh. The "waters" in his speech could have been those which drowned the Egyptian army. Yet Douglass instead chooses to invoke a different deluge: the flood in Genesis. God, the Bible recounts, brings waters from above and below to purify a world that has normalized wrongdoing. This, Douglass implies, has likewise been the case with slavery: slaves and masters alike were caught in a "great social system," one inured to its evils. Thus just as God extends to the postdiluvian world an olive branch—a chance at a new beginning for humanity—so too, Douglass suggests, an olive branch should be extended to slavery's agents. With the slave system washed away, they will together have the chance to make the world anew.²³

NATURAL RIGHTS FROM BELOW

In this article, I have argued that Frederick Douglass reconstructs core elements of natural rights thought via techniques of embodiment and redescription. In his slave narratives, the philosophy's core concepts—among them freedom, reason, dignity, and moral responsibility—are concretized in practice and reconceived in meaning. Against those who interpret his ideas in straightforwardly Lockean terms, as well as

those who read into his thought a "fugitive" critique of Enlightenment, I showed that Douglass remains committed to key liberal ideas while subtly reconfiguring them. By reinterpreting his antebellum and wartime texts, I showed that he articulates an important and original political theory: a philosophy of natural rights, told from below.

In this way, Douglass anticipates a number of influential contemporary critiques of Enlightenment and liberal thought which have similarly sought to foreground the plight of the powerless. For example, recent theorists have suggested that a too-narrow focus on individual choices blinds us to inequalities rooted in social structures (Anderson 1999); that moral responsibility should be at least partly conceived in collective terms (Harris 1974); that human dignity is often granted or denied to marginalized groups via intersubjective processes (Young 1990; Taylor 1994; Kymlicka 1996); that our selfhood depends on the communities in which we become enmeshed (Sandel 1998); and that even the most purportedly civilized and enlightened societies can dehumanize whole groups of people—render them invisible, "superfluous," or marked for destruction (Arendt [1951] 1994).

These critiques represent only a few of the Douglass echoes we find in contemporary political theory, and I do not mean to suggest that his ideas can answer them. My aims in this article have been more modest: to contribute to elucidating Douglass's thought, and to help situate it into broader debates on key moral, social, and political questions. Methodologically, I have drawn from texts, like biographies, which are not conventional sources for political theory.²⁴ Still, I think they gain us something important. Douglass was not a professional philosopher. Nor did he set out to be one: he was a writer, statesman, journalist, and rhetorician. Rather than discourse abstractly, he rendered ideas empathically and eidetically. He wrote this way, to be sure, as a means to persuade—to jolt our conscience, rouse our anger, and motivate us to act. But he also wrote this way because he recognized that stories—his own, and those of oppressed people everywhere—contain their own distinctive insights. They speak to truths which elude philosophy. They impart lessons about human experience, and humanity itself, inaccessible to categories of elite discourse. They give us a political theory not only about, but of, the powerless.

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²³ For a more detailed discussion of the religious dimensions of mutual responsibility in Douglass, see Buccola (2012, ch. 4). Contra Buccola, however, I believe it is more accurate to use Douglass's own terminology in describing slavery as a "social system," rather than employing the contemporary concept of a "moral ecology."

²⁴ For an important recent exception see Bennett (2019).

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

The author affirm this research did not involve human participants.

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