

“Each for All and All for Each”: The Liberal Statesmanship of Frederick Douglass

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Abstract: Most scholars agree that Frederick Douglass was a liberal—he was committed to individual rights, toleration, limited government, and self-reliance. Wilson Carey McWilliams deviated from this view by suggesting that Douglass’s experience as a slave led him to appreciate human interdependence and reject liberalism in favor of fraternal communitarianism. In this essay, Douglass’s response to the problem of slavery is examined in order to demonstrate that both the liberal and the fraternal readings are correct. Douglass’s aims were undoubtedly liberal, but he thought these aims could only be realized in a community of individuals who felt strong obligations to one another. As a statesman, Douglass was confronted with the challenge of convincing free people that they ought to care about those who are enslaved. My aim here is to explore how he met that challenge and with what consequences for how we think about liberal statesmanship.

Introduction

How do we convince free men that they ought to care about the plight of slaves? In this essay, I explore how Frederick Douglass responded to this question by offering a series of arguments in favor of the claim that each individual should feel obligated to extend the promises of liberalism to all people. As a progressive reformer, Douglass was concerned with the question of how individuals are “taught justice, humanity, and civilization,” and in what follows, I examine the rhetoric he used to urge his listeners to behave in more socially responsible ways.¹ His case for a robust sense of mutual obligation has implications beyond his own abolitionist project. Consideration of his statesmanship is worthwhile because it invites us to reflect on a perennial problem of political life, something I am calling the challenge of liberal

I would like to thank Catherine Zuckert, Kelli Brown and others at ROP who assisted me in the preparation of this essay. I am also grateful for the constructive criticisms of the anonymous reviewers and special thanks go to Mark Kann, Allison Renteln, and James Kincaid who read and commented on early drafts of this essay.

¹John Blassingame, ed., *The Frederick Douglass Papers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979–1992), “The Nation’s Problem,” April 16, 1889, 5:424–25. [Hereinafter: *Douglass Papers*, title of speech, date of speech, volume: Page Number.]

community: How do we get freedom-loving individuals to feel a strong sense of responsibility to others?² Douglass did not solve this puzzle, but his example provides us a moment in political history when a statesman stared this problem in the face and adopted a series of strategies for confronting it.

In the next part, I provide a brief description of the ongoing interpretive and evaluative debates about the nature and value of Douglass's contribution to American political thought. Then, I show how the issue of slavery brought the challenge of liberal community front and center. As a political abolitionist, his most urgent goal was to convince free people that they should feel a sense of responsibility to bring about the abolition of slavery. I contend that the liberal language of rights offered a limited explanation of why individuals ought to feel responsible to one another, so Douglass infused it with a strong case for interconnection and mutual responsibility. In the next part of the essay, I turn to how Douglass the statesman made the case for a more robust sense of responsibility to others. He offered a variety of reasons for a deeper sense of connection and responsibility to others including sympathy based on feelings of human brotherhood, commitment to the idea of universal natural rights, self-interest, and sympathy based on respect for virtuous action. First, I examine his reliance on the idea of human brotherhood. Douglass appealed to the natural bond between human beings and expressed hope that universal freedom could be achieved through moral suasion. Second, I explore his arguments rooted in commitment to liberal principles of political morality. As Douglass lost some faith in the power of natural sympathy, he turned to political action and attempted to move his fellows to behave in responsible ways by emphasizing the moral commitments expressed in the Declaration of Independence and Constitution. He argued that a principled commitment to freedom should lead us to care about the rights of others. Third, I explore his appeal to self-interest as a basis for responsibility to others. I show that he appealed to self-interest by arguing that failure to behave in responsible ways weakens “the sheet anchor of common safety” that protects all of us.³ Fourth, I discuss Douglass's hope that a stronger sense of sympathy might emerge as a result of respect for virtuous action. He expressed hope that individuals excluded from the promise of freedom could earn the concern of their fellow citizens by exhibiting virtues such as courage and independence. I then explore Douglass's attentiveness to “moral ecology.” I contend that the experience of slavery led him to appreciate that just as the “peculiar institution” begot a whole way of thinking that supported its existence, so too might free institutions. I conclude with some reflections on the implications of Douglass's statesmanship for contemporary political theory and practice.

²Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this way of framing the nature of Douglass's contribution.

³*Douglass Papers*, “We Are Not Yet Quite Free,” August 3, 1869, 4: 233.

The Douglass Debates: The Nature and Value of Douglass's Contribution

The nature and value of Douglass's contribution to the American political tradition are still matters of some dispute. As an interpretive matter, the dominant view is that he is best understood as a defender of natural rights liberalism.⁴ Douglass, most interpreters contend, was devoted to individual rights, religious toleration, limited government, and an ethos of self-reliance. In an intriguing deviation from this dominant view, Wilson Carey McWilliams emphasized Douglass's devotion "to the ideal of human fraternity," which finds its "principal antagonists in those who accept individualism and the doctrine of 'self-reliance.'" Douglass's embrace of fraternity, McWilliams contended, was rooted in the experience of slavery, which brought him closer to "a true recognition of human weakness and dependence."⁵ Historian Daniel McInerney has argued that Douglass and other abolitionists adopted the language of republicanism (which includes "classical theory, civic humanist thought, and radical Whig traditions") to make the case against chattel slavery.⁶ In a similar vein, Michael Sandel identifies Douglass with the civic republican "political antislavery" strand of thought (as opposed to the liberal "abolitionist" strand of William Lloyd Garrison and others).⁷ An important interpretive question remains: was Douglass a "run of the mill" liberal or did he go beyond liberalism in order to make a case for a more robust sense of obligation to others?

⁴Leslie Friedman Goldstein, "The Political Thought of Frederick Douglass" (Ph.D. diss. Cornell University, 1974), 55; Waldo E. Martin, *The Mind of Frederick Douglass* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1984), 71, 256; Judith Shklar, *American Citizenship* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 97; John P. Diggins, *On Hallowed Ground: Abraham Lincoln and the Foundations of American History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 275; Bill E. Lawson, "Frederick Douglass and Social Progress," in *Frederick Douglass: A Critical Reader*, ed. Frank M. Kirkland and Bill E. Lawson (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 383; David F. Ericson, *The Debate over Slavery* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 42; David Schrader, "Natural Law in Douglass's Constitutional Thought," in *Frederick Douglass: A Critical Reader* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1999); Gayle McKeen, "Whose Rights? Whose Responsibility? Self-Help in African-American Thought," *Polity* 34, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 415; Peter C. Myers, "Frederick Douglass' Natural Rights Constitutionalism: The Postwar, Pre-Progressive Period," in *The Progressive Revolution in Politics and Political Science*, ed. John Marini and Ken Masugi (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005).

⁵Wilson Carey McWilliams, *The Ideal of Fraternity in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 582.

⁶Daniel McInerney, *The Fortunate Heirs of Freedom: Abolition and Republican Thought* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press), 1.

⁷Michael Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 177–81.

The evaluative picture is no less muddled. Several commentators have identified Douglass as an important figure in the history of American political thought. Almost four decades ago, Herbert Storing wrote of Douglass: "[F]ew men deserve so fully the rank of American statesman."⁸ Douglass's contemporary admirers cover the span of the American ideological spectrum from Cornel West to Clarence Thomas.⁹ But Douglass is not without his detractors. Several scholars have argued that he was excessively individualistic, partisan, and short-sighted. Waldo E. Martin argues that Douglass's personal success may have blinded him to "the structural reality of the economic oppression blacks endured" and his "stalwart Republicanism contributed to his failure to explore more carefully and fully alternative political possibilities for his people's struggle, such as the third party insurgency of Populism."¹⁰ Philosopher Charles W. Mills contends that Douglass was wrong to embrace the natural law philosophy of the American founders and to read the Constitution as antislavery. Mills concludes that "everything Douglass said is wrong."¹¹ Peter F. Walker and, more recently, Wilson Jeremiah Moses, have produced psycho-historical studies of Douglass in which they analyze the political-theoretical significance of his life and autobiographical writings. Walker criticizes Douglass for having a "social imagination" that failed to transcend the limits of Radical Republicanism.¹² Moses portrays Douglass as a self-promoting "showman," whose writings are wrought with "complexities, ambivalences, and contradictions."¹³ Although Moses maintains some admiration for Douglass, he concludes that Douglass failed to confront many of the challenges that blacks faced during the nineteenth century.

⁸Herbert Storing, "Frederick Douglass," in *American Political Thought: The Philosophic Dimension of American Statesmanship*, ed. Morton J. Frisch and Richard J. Stevens (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), 145. For a more recent account that reaches a similar conclusion, see Richard S. Ruderman, "Proclaim Liberty throughout the Land: Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, and the Abolition of Slavery," in *History of American Political Thought*, ed. Bryan-Paul Frost and Jeffrey Sikkenga (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003).

⁹Cornel West, *Democracy Matters* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 22; Andrew Peyton Thomas, *Clarence Thomas: A Biography* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2001), 550.

¹⁰Waldo Martin, *The Mind of Frederick Douglass*, 282.

¹¹Charles W. Mills, "Whose Fourth of July? Frederick Douglass and 'Original Intent,'" in *Frederick Douglass: A Critical Reader*, 134.

¹²Peter F. Walker, *Moral Choices: Memory, Desire, and Imagination in Nineteenth-Century American Abolition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 273.

¹³Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Creative Conflict in African American Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 59. "At the peak of his power and influence, Douglass scoffed at the idea of black unity, opposed the idea of separate black institutions, and sometimes denied the need for any concept of racial pride. And yet, he continued to participated in black institutions, took pride in black accomplishments, and exploited his status as a black spokesman."

This essay speaks to both the interpretive and evaluative debates. On the question of how best to classify Douglass's thought, I contend that he is best understood as a liberal statesman who was acutely aware, as McWilliams has suggested, of the ways in which freedom depends upon the prevalence of strong moral bonds of community. In other words, McWilliams was right to suggest that Douglass's personal experiences led him to an appreciation of the ways in which individuals are dependent on one another, but this did not lead him to reject liberalism.¹⁴ Instead, he relied on an egalitarian understanding of natural rights philosophy as the basis for a robust conception of community. According to Douglass, the respect and protection of each person's rights is required by universal moral law.¹⁵ The obligations to respect individual rights and to see to it that those rights were protected from violation by others were, for Douglass, the basis for a distinctively liberal understanding of community. The project of achieving and maintaining freedom, he thought, is best understood as one that required a robust sense of moral obligation to others: the principle "each for all and all for each" was at the center of his political thought.

On the evaluative question—of what value is Douglass's thought—I offer the following response. As a matter of political philosophy, Douglass was devoted to an egalitarian understanding of natural rights. Part of his rhetorical strategy as a statesman was to argue that the natural rights of all people ought to be respected and protected. Douglass's reliance on natural rights is not, however, particularly novel and the epistemological foundations of this way of thinking are a matter of great controversy. In this essay, rather than arguing that Douglass's arguments are especially compelling as political philosophy, I contend that his contribution lies in the realm of philosophical statesmanship. Although Douglass left us something short of a systematic political philosophy, the arguments he offered speak to enduring problems for liberalism. More specifically, in his attempt to bring about the abolition of slavery, Douglass was forced to confront a persistent problem of political life: How do we convince individuals that they have obligations to one another beyond mutual forbearance? At the foundation of this question lies

¹⁴My interpretation is not altogether novel. Goldstein, Myers, and Martin, for example, all recognize the importance of community and responsibility in Douglass's thought. I do think, though, that many of Douglass's interpreters—Judith Shklar and John Patrick Diggins come to mind—have overemphasized Douglass's individualism at the expense of an appreciation of the communitarian elements. Shklar identifies Douglass with "the party of individual effort" and Diggins identifies him with the "liberal individualism" of contemporary black conservatives like Shelby Steele and Thomas Sowell.

¹⁵By this, I mean that Douglass believed the natural rights of *all* individuals must be respected and that it is an unacceptable moral state of affairs if the natural rights of any individual are being violated. The respect and protection of rights is required not by utility or convention, but by natural law.

a deeper one: What is the moral glue that binds individuals together in a liberal political community? Responding to these questions was at the heart of Douglass's project as a liberal statesman. In this essay, I examine the arguments he offered to the American people in defense of a more robust sense of interconnectedness and mutual responsibility.

No Freedom from Responsibility: What Free Men Owe to Slaves

Douglass's concern with the nature and extent of the individual's obligation to others was rooted in the problem of slavery. His experiences as a slave and abolitionist led him to ask several questions. What responsibilities do free individuals have toward slaves? Have I fulfilled my obligations to others if I do not own slaves? If I have duties beyond forbearance, what are the reasons for these duties? The problem of slavery made these questions urgent in his mind.

Douglass often compared the situation of the slave to that of an innocent person on a pirate ship. He used the pirate ship analogy to combat alternative notions of moral responsibility offered by followers of William Lloyd Garrison who favored disunion and Northern moderates like Abraham Lincoln who favored keeping the Union together without abolishing slavery. Consideration of the pirate ship analogy is a useful way of explaining Douglass's view that there “is no freedom from responsibility for slavery, but in the Abolition of slavery.”¹⁶

To leave the slave in his chains, in the hands of cruel masters, who are too strong for him, is not to free ourselves from responsibility. Again: If I were on board of a pirate ship, with a company of men and women whose lives and liberties I had put in jeopardy, I would not clear my soul of their blood by jumping in the long boat, and singing out no union with pirates. My business would be to remain on board, and while I never would perform a single act of piracy again, I should exhaust every means given me by my position, to save the lives and liberties of those against whom I had committed piracy. In like manner, I hold it is our duty to remain inside this Union, and use all the power to restore [to the] enslaved millions their precious and God-given rights. The more we have done by our voice and our votes, in times past, to rivet their galling fetters, the more clearly and solemnly comes the sense of duty to remain, to undo what we have done. Where, I ask, could the slave look for release from slavery if the Union were dissolved?¹⁷

The central moral question presented by the pirate ship scenario is this: What is my obligation to the men and women whose lives and liberties are in

¹⁶*Douglass Papers*, “The Dred Scott Decision,” May 1857, 3:173.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 173–74.

jeopardy on the pirate ship? The Garrisonian response is to jump ship and sing out “no union with pirates.” According to Garrison’s reasoning, if I remove myself from association with sin, I am no longer complicit in it. Hence, leaving the ship would absolve me of responsibility.¹⁸ Another response would be to promise that “I never would perform a single act of piracy again.” This represents the Northern moderate view of nonextension. According to this perspective, I would be absolved of responsibility if I left the innocent people under the dominion of pirates but promised not to perform or support piracy in the future. Douglass rejected both of these options in favor of a strong view of moral responsibility. My “business,” Douglass contended, would be to stay on board and do all that I can to save the lives and liberties of the innocent people. This view represents the political abolitionist perspective: our obligation is to commit ourselves to combat violations of liberal principles. From Douglass’s point of view, it was not enough simply to denounce slavery as immoral or to promise to not allow slavery to extend into new territories. Instead, it was the obligation of everyone to stay in the Union and work to bring about the abolition of slavery.

The problem of slavery presented Douglass with a concrete case of what I am calling the challenge of liberal community. While it is certainly true that slavery violates the essential liberal commitment to personal freedom, it is less clear how one can make the case that a free person has an obligation to combat slavery. Douglass’s task, then, was to convince his contemporaries to adopt a sense of moral responsibility strong enough that they would feel moved to act on behalf of those who had been excluded from the liberal promise of freedom.

“Am I My Brother’s Keeper?” Douglass’s Case for Mutual Responsibility

In order to convince people to take action to abolish slavery, Douglass had to argue that individuals ought to feel a sense of responsibility to one another beyond mutual forbearance. In this part, I explore how he made this case. As noted above, a consideration of his arguments is worthwhile not necessarily because of their philosophical rigor but because of the model they provide of liberal statesmanship. Liberal statesmen are faced with a special challenge when trying to cultivate a sense of community. The individualism at the core of liberalism makes it difficult to convince individuals that they ought to feel extensive obligations to others. Douglass did not solve the challenge of liberal community, but his life’s work offers us a concrete example of how one statesman grappled with it.

¹⁸In all fairness to Garrison, it should be noted that he believed disunion would leave slaveholders more susceptible to slave revolts and, therefore, force them to consider emancipation more seriously. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for emphasizing this point.

In what follows, I contend that Douglass offered four major arguments for a stronger sense of responsibility to others: human brotherhood, commitment to natural rights, self-interest properly understood, and respect for virtuous action. The multifaceted character of Douglass's case was rooted in his belief in the duality of human nature. He believed that “nature has two voices,” one that is humane and just and another that is selfish and prone to injustice.¹⁹ Human beings are essentially good—they are naturally humane and rational—but they are also “constantly liable to do evil”—their selfishness can lead them to disregard the voices of humanity and rationality.²⁰ If all human beings were good all of the time, they would find natural rights philosophy compelling and act accordingly. This is not the case so it is the duty of good statesmen to attempt to convince their fellow citizens to behave responsibly.

“Nature makes Us Friends”: Human Brotherhood as the Basis for Moral Responsibility

The first set of arguments Douglass offered as the basis for a strong sense of moral responsibility were rooted in universal human brotherhood.²¹ He presented his audience with both divine and secular versions of these arguments. Early in his career, when he was convinced that slavery continued to exist because it was considered religiously respectable, he emphasized the idea of Divine Fatherhood. Emancipation, he argued, ought to be motivated by “the pure, single-eyed spirit of benevolence” rooted in “the heavenly teachings of Christianity, which everywhere teaches that God is our Father, and man, however degraded, is our brother.”²² Later, his arguments tended to be more secular in character. Reflecting on his career as a humanitarian reformer, he described his motivation in this way: “In the essential dignity of man as man, I find all necessary incentives and aspirations to a useful and noble life. Manhood is broad enough, and high enough as a platform for you and me and all of us.”²³ Human brotherhood was, for Douglass, a powerful moral idea. Whether one believes that all human beings are children of God or that all men are dignified by virtue of their humanity, the appeal to human brotherhood is one possible basis for a strong notion of moral responsibility to others.

¹⁹*Douglass Papers*, “Our Composite Nationality,” December 7, 1869, 4:251.

²⁰*Life and Writings*, “Is Civil Government Right?” 1851, 5: 209.

²¹When Douglass used the term “human brotherhood” he intended for women to be included. When Douglass was thinking of changing the name of his newspaper, one of the possibilities was “The Brotherhood,” but he rejected this name because he worried it “implies an exclusion of the sisterhood.”

²²*Douglass Papers*, “The Significance of Emancipation in the West Indies,” August 3, 1857, 3: 195.

²³*Douglass Papers*, “The Blessings of Liberty and Education,” September 3, 1894, 5: 625.

What are the implications of this insight for liberal statesmanship? Douglass's belief that human beings have a natural sense of brotherhood led him to have some faith that moral suasion could move men to behave in responsible ways. A good statesman, he believed, could seek to cultivate this sense of brotherhood by reminding people of the divine and secular reasons for feeling connected to their neighbors. The slave, Douglass declared, is your brother and you ought to treat him as such.

“Our Civic Catechism”: Commitment to Natural Rights and Our Obligations to Others

Douglass called the Declaration of Independence our “civic catechism.” The fundamental commitment of the Declaration, as he read it, was to universal natural rights. The second major component of his argument for a more robust sense of moral responsibility was an appeal to the idea of natural rights. According to this argument, one's feeling of obligation is rooted less in a sense of connection with others than it is in a devotion to a principle of political morality. In making the case for abolition and equal citizenship, Douglass often appealed to the philosophy of natural rights as the basis for linking individuals together. Even if one does not love one's neighbor, he thought, the belief in the truth of natural rights theory may move a citizen to care if a neighbor's rights are violated.

Douglass's understanding of the power of commitment to an idea was rooted in his reflections on the Southern “slaveocracy.” He argued that slavery was able to persist in the South because it begot “a character in the whole network of society surrounding it, favorable to its continuance.” The “friends of slavery,” he said, “are bound by the necessity of their system to do just what the history of the country shows they have done—that is, to seek to subvert all liberty, and to pervert all the safeguards of human rights.”²⁴ The friends of freedom, Douglass argued, ought to learn a lesson from the friends of slavery. In order to achieve and maintain a political ideal, a moral ecology supportive of its existence must be developed.²⁵ This moral ecology “shapes” individuals in a way that promotes that political ideal.

Just as the friends of slavery acted in ways consistent with their devotion to the idea of slavery, the friends of freedom, Douglass contended, should be devoted to the idea of freedom and act accordingly. During the periods of Civil War and Reconstruction, he often appealed to the idea of natural rights as the basis for a robust sense of moral duty. Douglass's hope was that men would be so devoted to freedom that they would be moved to action on behalf of those who were not free.

²⁴*Douglass Papers*, “The American Apocalypse,” June 16, 1861, 3: 444.

²⁵More on moral ecology below.

To the liberal mind, this may seem like a decidedly more promising rationale for a more robust sense of moral responsibility than human brotherhood. While fraternal theories often seem to be rooted in emotion, a sense of community based on the shared commitment to freedom appeals to our reason.²⁶ I express concern when my neighbor is deprived of his liberty not because I love him as a brother, but because I am deeply committed to personal freedom as an ideal of political morality. This may seem like a more reasonable basis than human brotherhood, and it may be better suited to a pluralistic society, where inclusive bases for interpersonal affection are hard to find.

Can commitment to the idea of natural rights serve as an actuating motive for a more robust sense of moral responsibility? Douglass expressed some hope that it could. His emphasis on commitment to natural rights manifested itself politically in his shift from the Garrisonian focus on moral suasion to the political abolitionist case for state action to abolish slavery. In the late 1840s, Douglass rejected the Garrisonian reading of the Constitution as proslavery, and in 1851, he announced his conversion to the antislavery reading developed by Lysander Spooner, Gerrit Smith, and William Goodell. The question of whether Douglass converted to antislavery constitutionalism on the basis of principle or pragmatism is beyond my scope here. What is important for my purposes is the ways in which the conversion affected his case for a more robust sense of moral responsibility. When he announced his conversion in *The North Star*, Douglass wrote that he now believed it was “the first duty of every American citizen, whose conscience permits him to do so, to use his political as well as his moral power for [slavery’s] overthrow.”²⁷ The basis of this “first duty,” Douglass could now argue, was devotion to the natural rights philosophy of the Declaration of Independence—the basic expression of American political morality.

“The Sheet Anchor of Common Safety”: Self-Interest as a Basis for Community

Douglass’s third argument for a strong sense of connection to others appeals to an essential part of human nature, “the spirit of selfishness.” Individuals might be moved to feel connected to one another and behave in responsible ways, he thought, by appealing to their self-interest. Douglass argued that a stronger sense of mutual obligation would benefit everyone. The prevalence of a more robust sense of obligation to others, he reasoned, makes all of our rights more secure and makes our communities more hospitable to economic,

²⁶For a discussion of the irrational element of many theories of community, see Robert Booth Fowler, *The Dance with Community* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1993), 3.

²⁷*Life and Writings*, “Change in Opinion Announced,” May 23, 1851, 2:156.

intellectual, and moral progress. In this section, I examine Douglass's appeal to what Alexis de Tocqueville called "self-interest well understood."²⁸

Negative and positive dimensions of self-interest were appealed to in order to motivate free people to feel a stronger sense of responsibility to the slaves. Abolitionists appealed to the fear of Northerners by warning of a "slaveholders' conspiracy"—a plot by Southerners to extend slavery over as much of the nation as possible.²⁹ This conspiracy was a threat to free Northerners not because they were likely to be enslaved but because these conspirators would be willing to trample on the rights of all Americans in order to accomplish their nefarious aims. The slave power wanted to extend slavery into the territories so it could dominate the federal government. Once the slave power dominated the federal government, Douglass warned, it would subordinate Northern values and interests. Douglass's warnings about the "slaveholders' conspiracy" and "the slave power" are examples of appealing to the self-interest of his Northern audience in order to get them to feel a strong sense of obligation to abolish slavery.

In addition to appealing to Northern fears about the secret machinations of the slave power, Douglass appealed to self-interest by making arguments that everyone benefits from strong bonds of community. This is a sort of "we are all in the same boat" argument for stronger bonds of community. Douglass often defended the principle "each for all and all for each" by appealing to self-interest: "The principle involved [in the struggle for equal rights] is one for which every man ought to contest. It involves the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and it is the business of every American citizen, white and black, to stand for this principle, each for all, and all for each, as the sheet anchor of common safety."³⁰ It is my business to stand up for the rights of others, Douglass argued, because my willingness to do so would strengthen the "sheet anchor" that protects my rights.

Douglass extended the self-interest argument to economic matters. In 1889, as former slaves were still being systematically discriminated against in the South, he delivered a speech on the so-called Negro Problem. He hoped that Northerners would intervene once again on behalf of Southern blacks: "There is yet good reason to believe in the virtue of the loyal American people. They hate fraud, loathe rapine, and despise meanness."³¹ He expressed less faith in the virtue of Southerners, but there was still some basis for hope that they would begin to behave in responsible ways. A great moral revolution would not take place overnight but perhaps, Douglass

²⁸Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. and ed. Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 501.

²⁹For Douglass's discussions of "the slave power," see "The Encroachment of Slave Power," September 5, 1855, and "Aggressions of the Slave Power," May 22, 1856, *Douglass Papers*, 3: 97, 114.

³⁰*Douglass Papers*, "We Are Not Yet Quite Free," August 3, 1869, 4: 233.

³¹*Douglass Papers*, "The Nation's Problem," April 16, 1889, 5: 424.

thought, the selfish side of human nature might move them to alter their treatment of blacks.

There is still another ground of hope for the freemen of the southern states. It is that the good citizens of these states cannot afford, and will not consent, to lag far behind the old free states in all the elements of civilization. They want population, capital, invention, and enterprise. They have rich resources to be developed, and they want both men and money to develop them and enhance their prosperity. The wise and loyal people in these states know very well that they can never be prosperous; that they can never have their share of immigration at home or abroad, while they are known and distinguished for intolerance, fraud, violence, and lynch law. . . . Thus the self-interest of the people of these states will yet teach them justice, humanity, and civilization.³²

Twenty years after the conclusion of the Civil War, Douglass had little hope that Southern culture would be reformed on the basis of humanitarianism or a rediscovery of the principles of the Declaration of Independence. Instead, he thought, the best hope for former slaves was an appeal to the self-interest of their white oppressors.

In this section, I have suggested that, perhaps paradoxically, Douglass appealed to self-interest in making his case for a strong sense of moral responsibility to others. One dimension was to appeal to the self-interest of Northerners by warning about the rise of the “slave power,” which sought to extend its dominion throughout the Union. The second dimension of the self-interest argument was more positive: strong bonds of moral community will benefit all of us in both political and economic terms. Politically, the prevalence of moral responsibility will benefit all of us because it will strengthen “the sheet anchor of common safety,” which protects all of our rights. Economically, responsible behavior will establish conditions that are more hospitable to development and prosperity. Economic prosperity, Douglass contended, is beneficial to the community not only because of the material comfort it provides but also because it provides the basis for intellectual and moral flourishing.³³ In his role as a reformer-statesman, Douglass attempted to convince his fellow Americans that to concern themselves with the well-being of slaves and other marginalized individuals was in their interest. Prevalence of a strong sense of duty to others, he insisted, was in each individual’s interest.

A critic may worry that Douglass’s appeal to self-interest suffers from serious shortcomings. Although it is difficult to gauge the effectiveness of Douglass’s appeal to self-interest, when we consider this strategy in

³²Ibid., 424–25.

³³For more discussion of the relationship between Douglass’s philosophy of self-reliance and his commitment to intellectual and moral cultivation, see McKeen, “Whose,” 415.

hindsight, difficulties arise. Most important, the reliance on white self-interest seems to be a rather precarious foundation for black elevation. Unlike a foundation rooted in the immutable idea of natural rights, the appeal to self-interest is essentially contingent. If you believe that your interests are served by feeling a strong sense of concern for your neighbor, then you ought to behave in a morally responsible way. If not, your neighbor is out of luck. Furthermore, the idea of appealing to white interests, one might argue, perpetuates the existence of a hierarchical and unjust social structure.

Although this is a potent criticism of Douglass's appeal to self-interest, I think it would be a mistake to conclude that such appeals were unwise. It is important to remember the context within which Douglass offered these arguments. Before and after the Civil War, he lamented the fact that the vast majority of Americans were unmoved by appeals to reason and morality. As a statesman with concrete and urgent political goals, Douglass could not afford to stand by and wish that he were operating in a more humanitarian political culture. We may look back at the appeal to self-interest and see it as an inherently problematic strategy, but it is certainly an understandable one given the context in which Douglass operated.

Earned Sympathy: Proving Oneself Worthy of Respect and Concern

So far, I have described three of Douglass's arguments for a strong sense of moral responsibility: natural sympathy based on human brotherhood, commitment to the idea of natural rights, and self-interest properly understood. The final category of argument is what I am calling earned sympathy—sympathy that arises in response to virtuous action. Even if I do not believe an individual is entitled to concern and respect as my brother, I may come to believe you have *earned* my sympathy.

It may seem strange to include Douglass's discussion of how individuals can earn the respect of others in the context of an exploration of the arguments he offered to build up the bonds of moral community. What, a critic may ask, does Douglass's encouragement of virtuous behavior have to do with the problem of cultivating a robust sense of moral duty to others? I believe this discussion is appropriate here because Douglass thought that what marginalized groups do for themselves was crucial to the quest for inclusion. As a statesman, Douglass had two primary audiences. First, he was speaking to those in positions of power—the white population and their elected representatives. His hope was that he could convince them to feel a sense of moral duty to slaves that was strong enough to move them to take action. As I demonstrated above, he did this by appealing to feelings of human brotherhood, commitment to the idea of natural rights, and to self-interest properly understood. Douglass's second audience was composed of those at the margins of or excluded from American citizenship: the free black population, women and, to the extent he could reach them, the enslaved population.

Understanding his message to these outsiders is crucial to my task here because Douglass believed their behavior was essential to the cultivation of strong bonds of community. By demonstrating himself to be virtuous, Douglass hoped, the outsider could earn the sympathy of those in power and move them to take action to include him in the political community.

In a liberal political culture, the idea of earned sympathy is intriguing because it emphasizes the importance of individual initiative. This behavior-based argument is rooted in the notion that individuals can earn the respect of others by acting in particular ways. In this section, I explore Douglass’s discussion of the types of behavior that can earn the respect and concern of others.

In an important 1860 essay, “The Prospect in the Future,” Douglass’s strategy of encouraging individuals to earn concern and respect is evident. He began the essay by acknowledging that abolitionists had “reached a point of weary hopelessness.” Whereas Douglass had once believed that enlightenment would bring about emancipation, he now recognized that this was not to be. The American people acknowledge the “horrid truths” of slavery, “but they are not moved to action.”

An able advocate of human rights gratifies their intellectual tastes, pleases their imaginations, titillates their sensibilities into a momentary sensation, but does not move them from the downy seat of inaction. They are familiar with every note in the scale of abstract rights, from the Declaration of Independence to the orations of Charles Sumner, but seem to regard the whole as a grand operatic performance, of which they are mere spectators. You cannot relate a new fact, or frame an unfamiliar argument on this subject. —Reason and morality have emptied their casket of richest jewels into the lap of this cause, in vain.³⁴

Douglass’s loss of faith in reason and morality is striking, but not surprising. The 1850s were difficult for abolitionists. The congressional compromises, the *Dred Scott* decision, and the execution of John Brown were, for abolitionists like Douglass, indications that most Americans were not sufficiently moved by appeals to human brotherhood or the “civic catechism of the Declaration of Independence” to do the right thing. The big question was why: “What is the explanation for this terrible paradox of passing history?”³⁵

Douglass said the problem was not that the American people “fail to appreciate the value of liberty.” History, he wrote, demonstrates that they “have shown great courage and patriotism in defending *their own freedom*, but have utterly failed in the magnanimity and philanthropy necessary to prompt respect for the rights of another and a weaker race.” It is not, he continued, “because we fail to appreciate or lack the courage to defend our own rights that we permit the existence of slavery among us, but it is because our patriotism is intensely selfish, our courage lacks generosity, and our love of liberty is circumscribed

³⁴*Life and Writings*, “The Prospect in the Future,” August 1860, 2: 494.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 495.

by our narrow and wicked selfhood, that we quietly permit a few tyrants to crush a weak people in our midst."³⁶ Douglass declared that our national character was based on the selfish philosophy of Cain. We, as a nation, look at the plight of the slave and ask, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Where in the midst of such a moral abyss could the slave turn? "The motive power which shall liberate the slave," Douglass wrote, "must be looked for in slavery itself—must be generated in the bosom of the bondman. Outside philanthropy never disenthralled any people."³⁷ He said that while "our" philanthropy, sense of justice, religion, and politics have all failed to motivate action, "there is a latent element in our national character which, if fairly called into action, will sweep anything down in its course. The American people admire courage displayed in defense of liberty, and will catch the flame of sympathy from the sparks of its heroic fire."³⁸ Unlike sympathy rooted in the simple fact of shared humanity, the sympathy based on merit depends upon action.³⁹ Throughout the 1850s, Douglass had doubted the practical wisdom of slave revolts, but by late 1860, his state of "weary hopelessness" led him to conclude that "the mere animal instincts and sympathies of [the American] people will do more for [American slaves] than has been accomplished by a quarter of a century of oratorical philanthropy."⁴⁰ Douglass concluded the essay by expressing regret that we had reached this point, but he offered some hope that once slavery was abolished and the moral ecology of American society was changed, a more humane politics might emerge.

We can never cease to regret that an appeal to the higher and better elements of human nature is, in this case, so barren of fitting response. But so it is, and until this people have passed through several generations of humanitarian culture, so it will be.—In the meantime the slave must continue to suffer or rebel, and did they know their strength they would not wait the tardy growth of our American sense of justice.⁴¹

Douglass's speech on "The Prospect in the Future" demonstrates that he believed exhibition of courage might foster self-respect and the respect of others. Through action, those excluded from the promise of freedom could undermine the notion that they were content with their condition and, hence, gain the respect of others. We must, Douglass declared, "struggle and make sacrifices for our rights. I hold that next to the dignity of being a freeman, is the dignity of striving to be free."⁴² If one's dignity is not acknowledged on

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid., 496.

³⁸Ibid., 497.

³⁹In philosophical terms, sympathy from brotherhood is an a priori view of human dignity, and sympathy from merit is an a posteriori view of human dignity.

⁴⁰*Life and Writings*, "The Prospect in the Future," August 1860, 2: 497.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²*Douglass Papers*, "Citizenship and the Spirit of Caste," May 11, 1858, 3: 210.

the basis of human brotherhood or a commitment to freedom, perhaps it might be acknowledged in response to courageous action in pursuit of liberty.⁴³

Courage is not the only virtue Douglass thought could lead to a greater sense of concern and respect. Throughout his writings, he emphasized the importance of *independence* for self-respect and the respect of others. This is yet another example of Douglass offering a merit-based argument for a sense of connection and duty to others. Prior to the Civil War, he urged a black audience to demonstrate by their behavior that slavery and other forms of subordination were unjust.

The world says the black man is unfit to live in a mixed society—to enjoy, and rightly appreciate the blessings of independence—that he must have a master, to govern him, and the lash to stimulate him to labor. Let us be prepared to afford, in our lives and conversation, an example of how grievously we are wronged by such a prevailing opinion of our race. Let us prove, by facts, not by theory, that independence belongs to our nature, in common with all mankind,—that we have intelligence to use it rightly, when acquired, and capabilities to ascend to the loftiest elevations of the human mind. Let such examples be given in the mental cultivation, and moral regeneration of our children, as they increase in knowledge, in virtue and in every ennobling principle in man’s nature.⁴⁴

On another occasion, Douglass put this point in even starker terms: “Men are not valued in this country, or any country, for what they *are*; they are valued for what they can *do*. It is in vain that we talk about being men, if we do not the work of men. We must show that we can *do* as well as *be*. . . . Society is a hard-hearted affair.”⁴⁵ Statements like these are an indication that Douglass believed the concern and respect of one’s fellows does not always follow from the dictates of reason or morality. Sometimes this concern and respect must be earned through virtuous action.⁴⁶ After the war, Douglass continued to offer this message as an essential part of the quest for full citizenship and

⁴³It is worth noting that Douglass’s appeal to black men to enlist in the Union Army was also, at least in part, rooted in his belief that courageous service would contribute to a greater sense of concern and respect from whites.

⁴⁴*Douglass Papers*, “The Slaveholders’ Rebellion,” July 4, 1862, 2: 536.

⁴⁵*Life and Writings*, “Freedom in the West Indies,” August 2, 1858, 2: 224.

⁴⁶Douglass’s message about the virtues of courage and independence directs us to a crucial point of controversy among his interpreters. On one side, there is Carey McWilliams, who argued that Douglass was devoted to fraternity, the antithesis of the liberal doctrine of self-reliance. On the other side, we have Douglass’s critics—including Wilson Jeremiah Moses and Peter Walker—who argue that Douglass’s appeal to a robust sense of obligation is vitiated by his emphasis on self-reliance. My claim is that both of these interpretations are flawed. Instead of choosing between fraternity and self-reliance, as McWilliams would have it, Douglass chose both. He argued that self-reliant behavior could enhance an individual’s sense of self-respect *and* enhance the respect of others.

assimilation into American society. The American people “can pity us as they can sympathize with us. But we need something more than sympathy—something more than pity. *We must be respected.* And we cannot be respected unless we are either independent or aiming to be.”⁴⁷

As noted above, Douglass had two audiences when he appealed to the idea of respect for virtuous action as a reason for mutual concern. First, he appealed to “outsiders” to behave in virtuous ways in order to prove themselves worthy of inclusion in the moral community. Second, he appealed to the sense of sympathy of the “insiders.” Even if they lacked a feeling of natural sympathy based on shared humanity, he wanted to convince them that they should feel moved to act on the basis of earned sympathy. Even if those in power do not view outsiders as their natural equals, Douglass hoped, they might be moved to believe that they have proven themselves worthy of concern and respect.

Douglass’s strategy of appealing to blacks to behave virtuously and appealing to whites to feel a sense of sympathy in response to this virtuous behavior is not without its difficulties. As Douglass himself would come to acknowledge later, virtuous behavior and individual success often intensified racism in the South. Blacks who were considered too bold and enterprising were often targets of white anger and violence. These blacks, the oppressors claimed, did not “know their place” and had to be taught to respect traditional hierarchies. Given this atmosphere, Douglass’s insistence that blacks act courageously and attempt to achieve independence may have been an invitation to further alienation and subordination, not greater concern and respect.

Once again, we may be tempted to use hindsight to condemn Douglass’s strategy. Given what Douglass knew about the evil in human nature, a critic might say, he should not have been so naïve. But we must keep in mind what options were available to him. Douglass’s earned sympathy arguments were aimed at those moderates who were not completely determined in their opposition to equal rights. His hope was that those who were unable to reason or moralize their way out of a selfish understanding of justice might be moved by “mere animal instincts” to feel sympathy for victims of injustice who behaved in virtuous ways.

Statesmanship, Moral Ecology, and the Challenge of Liberal Community

What lessons can we draw from Douglass’s arguments for a more robust sense of obligation to others? While the substance of each argument is potentially instructive for contemporary citizens and statesmen seeking to convince others to alter their behavior, there is a broader lesson to be learned from Douglass’s example. His arguments are best understood as part of an

⁴⁷*Life and Writings*, “The Civil Rights Case,” October 22, 1883, 4: 394.

ongoing concern with moral ecology, a concept described by political theorist Allen D. Hertzke as a "philosophical, empirical, and practical construct" which imagines a moral environment that is roughly analogous to the physical environment.⁴⁸ Although "moral ecology" was not in Douglass's vocabulary, he spoke often of the need to tend to "the soul," "the moral sense," "the moral atmosphere," and the "conscience" of the American republic.⁴⁹ In order to make people more disposed to respect natural rights and to take action to ensure that those rights were respected by others, Douglass thought it was important to cultivate a "humanitarian culture" that would make individuals more responsive to the "higher and better elements of human nature."⁵⁰ The liberal project of "securing the political conditions necessary for the exercise of personal freedom," Douglass believed, depends upon our attentiveness to the moral conditions that are supportive of this end.⁵¹

Douglass thought that the effectiveness of each of the arguments discussed above was affected by the health of the moral ecology. First, although a sense of human brotherhood is natural, it can be destroyed by a "moral atmosphere" that "renders people less humane."⁵² When a political community permits degrading and inhumane behavior, it contributes to the desensitization of individuals. Just as a sense of human brotherhood can be eroded by a corrupt moral atmosphere, it is also possible that "humanitarian culture" can make individuals more responsive to "the higher and better elements of human nature."⁵³ Second, our devotion to principles of political morality is influenced by moral ecology. Because human beings are capable of being moved by truth, he expressed hope that men could be educated to love freedom: "The more men know of the essential nature of things, and of the true relation to mankind, the freer they are from prejudice of every kind. . . . [I]gnorance is full of prejudice, but it will disappear with

⁴⁸Allen D. Hertzke, "The Concept of Moral Ecology," *Review of Politics* 60, no. 4 (1998), 629. To explain the idea, Hertzke gives the example of the Navajo "way of life," which held that "living an ecological life meant not only living in harmony with nature but also with one another." Sociologist Robert Bellah contends that the concern with moral ecology is rooted in a belief that "human beings and their societies are deeply interrelated, and the actions we take have enormous ramifications for the lives of others." Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 284.

⁴⁹*Life and Writings*, "Letter to Gerrit Smith," October 1874, 4: 308; *Douglass Papers*, "The Significance of Emancipation in the West Indies," August 1857, 3:193-94, "Lessons of the Hour," January 1894, 5: 596.

⁵⁰*Life and Writings*, "We Are Confronted by a New Administration," April, 1885, 2:497.

⁵¹Judith Shklar, "The Liberalism of Fear," in *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed. Nancy L. Rosenblum (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 21.

⁵²*Douglass Papers*, "America's Compromise with Slavery and the Abolitionists' Work," April 1846, 1: 210.

⁵³*Life and Writings*, "The Prospect in the Future," 2: 496-97.

enlightenment."⁵⁴ This education, Douglass thought, should take place not just through formal schooling, but from the day-to-day civic education that takes place through the interaction of citizens. Third, the moral atmosphere of the community affects the way individuals conceive of their self-interest. One of the difficult tasks for liberal statesmen is to establish an atmosphere in which most individuals believe it is in their interest to care about the well-being of their neighbors. Finally, Douglass believed that moral ecology affects how we define and respond to virtuous behavior. The moral atmosphere of the community determines what virtues are admired and how we respond to exhibitions of virtue. In a community that cares about freedom, we ought to admire those who act courageously in defense of freedom and who practice habits that are supportive of free institutions.

Conclusion: Frederick Douglass and the Struggle for Liberty

Douglass was not a systematic political philosopher. Like other thoughtful American statesmen, though, he offered philosophical reflections on enduring questions of political life. Douglass's thought is particularly interesting and compelling because he did not simply engage in abstract reflection on the promises and problems of liberalism. Instead, he drew on his experiences as a slave and reformer to offer an understanding of liberalism rooted in the concrete realities of political life. First, the physical and metaphysical cruelties of the slave system served as the "negative morality" at the foundation of his political thought; he drew on his personal experiences as a slave to formulate an uncompromising philosophy of natural rights.⁵⁵ All human beings, he argued, are born with a natural desire to be free and they are endowed with intellectual and moral capacities that make them fit for freedom. Slavery was the "summum malum" of Douglass's thought, and his defense of natural rights in the shadow of its horrors is an important part of the American liberal tradition.

In addition to drawing on the experience of slavery to offer a robust defense of natural rights, Douglass drew on his experience as a reformer to make the case that the promises of liberalism are not easy to realize or maintain. Instead, the project of achieving and securing freedom for all people is an extraordinarily arduous one that requires attention to moral ecology. In this essay, I have drawn attention to the strategies Douglass employed in order to convince Northerners that they ought to care about the plight of Southern slaves. While it may be the case that Douglass's rhetorical project failed to convince most Americans to adopt a political abolitionist outlook, the significance of his contribution goes far beyond the particular problem of American slavery. Douglass's example suggests that contemporary

⁵⁴*Life and Writings*, "The Southern Convention," July 1871, 4: 251.

⁵⁵Jonathan Allen, "The Place of Negative Morality in Political Theory," *Political Theory* 29, no. 3 (2001), 337–63.

political theorists and actors would do well to reflect on what it is that binds communities together and to think about how we can best convince individuals to care about one another.

Even if one does not accept Douglass's natural rights philosophy, his response to the challenge of liberal community may still have some currency as a model of liberal statesmanship. He realized that not all human beings were moved by moral truth and, as such, moral suasion was insufficient to unite citizens together and to motivate them to behave in responsible ways. As a statesman, Douglass thought it was necessary to appeal to a variety of actuating motives including feelings of human brotherhood, devotion to principles of political morality, self-interest rightly understood, and sympathy based on respect for the virtuous behavior of others. His case for why free people in the North should feel obligated to use their moral and political powers to liberate slaves in the South does not provide contemporary liberals with an airtight theoretical basis for a robust sense of responsibility to others. Instead, Douglass's most important contribution is his emphasis on the idea that liberals must be attentive to the political *and* moral conditions that are supportive of the ideal of universal freedom. The achievement of a robust system of individual rights, free institutions, and fair procedures is only part of the liberal project. Statesmen and citizens must also pay attention to the moral atmosphere in which individuals make political choices.⁵⁶

Although Douglass's primary aim was, in a political sense, one of liberation, his liberalism offers anything but a flight from responsibility. Indeed, he had extraordinarily high moral expectations of liberal citizens and statesmen. I think Douglass would agree with Judith Shklar's contention that “far from being an amoral free-for-all,” liberalism properly understood is “extremely difficult and constraining.”⁵⁷ What Douglass leaves us is not a series of solutions to liberalism's problems, but a series of challenges. Without struggle, he argued, freedom cannot be achieved or maintained. But one of the most appealing and problematic aspects of liberalism is that when we are true to it, we refrain from forcing one another to engage in this struggle. Instead, each individual is left with a series of choices and, in Douglass's words, free men can choose to “be angels, or they can be demons.”⁵⁸ The cultivation of a humanitarian culture, he hoped, would encourage individuals to choose wisely.

⁵⁶In saying this, I am not accusing all liberals or any particular liberal of failing to be attentive to moral ecology. Rather than viewing Douglass's thought as a corrective to the failures of other liberals, I think his thought contributes to the arguments of those contemporary scholars who have attempted to show that moral concerns have always been a central part of liberal theory. See, e.g., Peter Berkowitz, *Virtue and the Making of Modern Liberalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁵⁷Judith Shklar, *Ordinary Vices* (Cambridge: MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 5.

⁵⁸*Douglass Papers*, “The American Apocalypse,” June 1861, 3:437–38.