“The Essential Dignity of Man as Man”: Frederick Douglass on Human Dignity

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ABSTRACT

The idea of dignity figures prominently in Frederick Douglass’s philosophy of rights, duties, and virtues. In this essay, I argue that Douglass’s understanding of dignity is best understood as a capacities-based account; he contends that the special moral worth of human beings is rooted in their distinctive capacities to reason, to understand morality, to choose how they will act, and to think of themselves as subjects that exist through time. Douglass relied on this account to argue that human beings have certain rights that ought to be protected, that they have certain duties to others, and that they can demonstrate their dignity by using their capacities in virtuous ways. Douglass’s philosophy of dignity lends support to J. David Greenstone’s suggestion that Douglass is best understood as a reform liberal; he was focused on the cultivation of essential human capacities and the duty to secure the conditions necessary for others to cultivate those capacities.

In a speech he delivered near the end of his long life, Frederick Douglass reflected on the source of his “thoughts, feelings” and “motives for action” in his 6 decades of civil rights activism: “In the essential dignity of man as man,” he said, “I find all necessary incentives and aspirations to a useful and noble life” (1979–92, 5:625). What did Douglass mean when he appealed to the essentially contested concept of dignity? On what basis did he claim that human beings have dignity, or special moral worth? What implications did his appeal to dignity have for his political thought? In this essay, these are the central questions I seek to answer. I contend that the idea of dignity figures prominently in Douglass’s philosophy of rights, duties, and virtues and that

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his understanding of dignity is best described as a *capacities-based account*: the special moral worth of human beings, he argued, is rooted in the capacity to reason (the rational capacity), the capacity to comprehend morality (the moral capacity), the capacity to choose how to act (the volitional capacity), and the capacity to conceive of the self as a subject with a past, present, and future (the temporal subjective capacity). On the basis of this account, Douglass argued that human beings have certain *rights*—moral claims against the rest of society—that ought to be respected and protected; that human beings have *duties* to respect each other's rights and to combat injustice; and that human beings can demonstrate their dignity by behaving in *virtuous* ways. I conclude by arguing that my account of Douglass's philosophy of dignity lends support to J. David Greenstone's suggestion that he is best understood as a part of the reform liberal tradition in America, which combines traditional liberal commitments to individual rights, toleration, and limited government with the idea that "individuals have an obligation—not just the option—to cultivate and develop their physical, intellectual, aesthetic, and moral faculties" and, importantly, have an "obligation" to help "others do the same" (Greenstone 1993, 59).

I offer these reflections on the meaning and significance of dignity in Douglass's political thought in the midst of a flurry of new books on dignity, in which scholars have been trying to make sense of the meaning of the idea and its implications for political morality (Kateb 2011; Rosen 2012; Waldron 2012). The approach of all of these scholars has been to attempt to achieve these goals by examining the ideas of moral philosophers as well as evolving doctrines of constitutional and international law. In this essay, I hope to contribute, in a modest way, to this ongoing conversation about dignity by taking a different route: through an exploration of several significant invocations of the idea by one of the great reformer-statesmen of nineteenth-century American politics. While it is certainly true that Douglass was, first and foremost, a political actor, he was a reflective one. Through analysis of how he used and defended dignity in his speeches and essays, we might be better able to come to terms with what the concept means in real politics. I do not pretend that Douglass's thoughts on dignity will resolve the many disputes among these scholars on how best we are to understand the idea and its implications for political morality. I do, though, think a thorough consideration of Douglass's ideas is worthwhile for two major reasons. First, while I do not think an analysis of his ideas will resolve complex philosophical debates about the nature and function of dignity, I do think our understanding of dignity can only be enriched if we consider it in what the scholar Wai Chee Dimock calls the "multiple habitats" of dignity, which include philosophy, law, literature, and politics (Waldron 2012, 120). As we look in the "political habitat," an exam-

ination of one of the leading human rights activists of the nineteenth century, who appealed to dignity as a central idea in his thought, seems well worth our while. As we attempt to make sense of how Douglass expressed the idea of dignity in the political habitat, contemporary scholarship on the concept can provide us with some guidance. As a political actor, Douglass did not always provide philosophically rigorous explanations of his ideas. His political thought was, in short, often more evocative than analytical. Contemporary scholarship on dignity can help us interpret the meaning of Douglass's invocations of dignity and their significance in his political thought.

Second, a thorough consideration of Douglass's thoughts on dignity is worthwhile because it can help us make better sense of where he fits within the multiple traditions in American political thought. While Douglass has also been the subject of a flurry of scholarly treatises and essays of late, there is still much about his thought that is disputed, and one way to deepen our understanding is through a searching analysis of central ideas he expressed that have not received adequate attention. I believe dignity is one such idea.

My argument proceeds as follows. In section 1, I provide a very brief introduction to the idea of dignity. More specifically, I draw on the ideas of several philosophers from the Western tradition as well as some contemporary scholars to bring out dimensions of dignity that are especially relevant to my reading of Douglass. In section 2, I examine his appeal to "natural dignity" in his advocacy for women's rights. I argue that Douglass's capacities-based account of dignity served as a crucial moral bridge in his rhetoric between the *descriptive* claim that human beings have certain "natural powers" that distinguish them from other creatures and the *normative* claim that human beings have rights that ought to be respected and protected. In section 3, I turn my attention to the role of dignity in Douglass's understanding of duty. In order to make sense of the connections between dignity and duty, I examine "It Moves," Douglass's famous 1883 speech on "the philosophy of reform." In this speech, he drew on the idea of dignity—both explicitly and implicitly—to make the case that individuals have more than just a basic duty to respect the rights of others; in addition, individuals have a general duty to combat injustice or, more specifically, to reform society in ways that will protect the dignity and rights of all people. In section 4, I explore Douglass's use of dignity as a virtue by looking at his thoughts on the dignity of striving to be free, the dignity of labor, and the dignity of cultivating one's soul (intellectual and moral cultivation). According to the conception of dignity as a virtue, dignity is best understood as a "quality that manifests itself in human *behavior*" or "as a virtue—or the consequence or reward of virtue" (Rosen 2012, 6; Donnelly 2009, 15). I argue that there are important instances in Douglass's thought when he appears to be using dignity in this way and that they actually seem

to be fairly natural extensions of the capacities-based account he relied on in his discussions of rights and duties. In section 5, I conclude with some thoughts on how Douglass's philosophy of dignity might help us make sense of how best to understand his political morality. As noted above, I argue that his capacities-based account of human dignity and the rights, duties, and virtues that follow from it lend support to Greenstone's suggestion that he is best understood as a reform liberal. Douglass's emphasis on the moral significance of certain human capacities led him to develop a liberal political philosophy that was focused on the cultivation of those capacities and the duty to secure the conditions for others to do the same.

1. HUMAN DIGNITY: A VERY BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Human dignity, like any other idea, has a history, and that history might prove to be helpful in sorting out the nature of Douglass's views. It is well beyond my scope to explore the history of dignity in any great detail, so what follows will be, of necessity, quite cursory and broad. Dignity comes from the "Latin word *dignitas*," which "contains the notion of distinction, special merit" or "worthiness" (Zuckert 2007, 36; Meyer 1995, 46). Referring to a "person's dignity," according to philosopher Hugo Adam Bedau, "is another way of referring to a person's worth" (1992, 153). With this basic definition in mind, it might be helpful to think about general accounts of dignity that we can categorize, in a very broad way, as "premodern" and "modern." In its premodern form, this notion of distinction or worth often referred to "a rank within a recognized and established social hierarchy—for example, the dignity of a noble, or of a bishop" (Parent and Meyer 1992, 4). Philosopher Bernard Boxill calls this premodern formulation "the dignity of social rank" (1992, 103). Michael Rosen has argued that dignity "originated as a concept that denoted high social status and the honors and respectful treatment that are due to someone who occupied that position" (2012, 11). This understanding, in the words of political theorist Michael Zuckert, was "an aristocratic, not a democratic notion," and in our own time we "retain this aspect of dignity when we speak of a person as being dignified or acting with a particular dignity" (2007, 36).

In the modern formulation, dignity is less often linked to rank relative to other human beings than it is a reference to the worth, status, or distinction one has *as a human being*. "The tenor of much Enlightenment moral, political, and legal thought," philosophers William A. Parent and Michael J. Meyer write, "clearly leads in the direction of the *equal* recognition of individual human dignity" (1992, 8). According to Boxill, "the adjective *human* in 'human dignity' tells us that human dignity is something persons have in virtue of

their humanity, and not in virtue of their social rank" (1992, 103). In Bedau's formulation, "dignity or worth is a kind of value that all human beings have *equally* and *essentially*" or, put another way, human dignity asserts the "moral egalitarianism of persons" (1992, 153). The distinction, worth, or status of human beings is, on this account, relative to all other creatures. In the words of political theorist George Kateb, "All individuals are equal; no other species is equal to humanity. These are the two basic propositions that make up the concept of human dignity" (2011, 6). The philosopher Jeremy Waldron has argued that the modern conception of dignity is still "tied up with rank," but in a very different way than it was in premodern formulations. Dignity, he argues, "expresses the idea of the high and equal rank of every human person" and might best be understood "as nobility for the common man" (2012, 22).

This modern conception of dignity has a complex history, but given the centrality of its importance in Douglass's thought, it is worthwhile to consider some of the highlights of its philosophical genesis. More specifically, in very short form, I want to bring out some of the reasons that have been offered in defense of the claim that human beings have special moral worth. What, in the words of Kateb, are the "attributes, characteristics, and capacities" that great thinkers have identified as essential to human dignity (2011, 6)? For the fifteenth-century Italian Renaissance writer Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, the moral worth of a human being is rooted in his capacity to choose his own destiny. Pico declared that God made man "a work of indeterminate form" and said to man, "In conformity with thy free judgment, in whose hands I have placed thee, thou art confined by no bounds; and thou wilt fix limits of nature for thyself" (1965, 4–5). The seventeenth-century French thinker Blaise Pascal identified man's ability to think as essential to his dignity: "Man is but a reed, the feeblest in nature, but he is a reed that thinks. . . . All our dignity . . . consists in thought. By this we must raise ourselves, not by space and time which we could not fill. Let us try, then, to think aright, here is the foundation of morality" (Rosen 2012, 18). The English philosopher John Locke argued that the capacity to conceive of one's own subjectivity was the distinctive human capacity with the greatest significance. A person, he wrote, is "a thinking intelligent Being, that has reason and reflection, and considers itself as itself, the same thinking thing in different times and places; which it does only by that consciousness, which is inseparable from thinking" (1995, 247). This capacity for "temporal subjectivity" is what Locke thought separated human beings from other creatures, some of whom "perform many of the mental acts we associate with reason" (Zuckert 2007, 45). For the great Prussian thinker Immanuel Kant, the distinctive human capacity at the heart of dignity is the capacity for morality. In *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant argued that "the idea of the dignity of a rational being" is rooted in

that a rational being "obeys no law other than that which he himself at the same time gives." Kant continued, "morality, and humanity insofar as it is capable of morality, is that which alone has dignity" (1785/2012, 46).

In addition to these capacities-based accounts of dignity, contemporary philosophers Jeremy Waldron and Michael Rosen have identified what might best be called accounts of dignity *as virtue*. According to these accounts, dignity is not based so much on possessing certain capacities or on the position one occupies in a hierarchy, but rather as a "quality that manifests itself in human behavior or a virtue" (Rosen 2012, 6). Waldron has something like this in mind when he speaks of "dignity as bearing": "Dignity has resonances of something like noble bearing. . . . When we hear someone has dignity, what comes to mind are ideas such as: having a certain sort of presence; uprightness of bearing; self-possession and self-control; self-presentation as someone to be reckoned with; not being abject, pitiable, distressed, or overly submissive in circumstances of adversity" (2012, 22). In Rosen's words, this account of dignity focuses less on capacities one has than on what one "shows" in "their character or bearing" (2012, 57). As you will see in section 4, dignity as virtue proved to be an important part of Douglass's account, so it is worth noting here.

This very brief introduction to the idea of human dignity is meant only to be an overview of some key expressions of the idea throughout Western history. Douglass's contribution can, of course, be situated in the tradition of "modern" dignity described here. Like many of the thinkers discussed in this section, he relied on several distinctively human capacities—the capacity to choose, the capacity to think, the capacity to conceive of one's subjectivity through time, and the capacity to act morally—to ground the claim that human beings have special moral worth. During his nearly 6 decades in public life, he devoted himself to expanding the boundaries of dignity to include racial minorities, women, and other groups not then recognized as beings of equal moral worth. It is to Douglass's appeal to "natural dignity" as the basis for equal rights that I now turn.

2. DOUGLASS ON "NATURAL POWERS," NATURAL DIGNITY, AND EQUAL RIGHTS

One could begin this sort of analysis with lengthy reflections on how Douglass used the idea of dignity as the centerpiece of his arguments against slavery. Indeed, as he said in 1860, he believed that the "great and vital opposition to slavery" was rooted in "the fact that the slave is a man, clothed by the eternal God with the full dignity of manhood—a being of moral and intellectual powers, rights, duties and responsibilities" (1950–75, 2:491–92). Douglass's cri-

tique of slavery, though, has already received a great deal of scholarly attention from political theorists (Myers 2008; Buccola 2012). In this section on Douglass's appeal to dignity in his fight for equal rights, I have decided to focus on an area that has received less scholarly attention in political theory: his arguments in favor of the political rights of women. More specifically, in this section I look closely at two essays Douglass published one week apart from each other in 1870 in which he made the case for the equal rights of women to participate in the political system. In these essays, he defended "the natural right of woman to a voice in the Government under which she lives" on the basis of the "natural dignity" of women as human beings (1950–75, 4:235). In this section, I use Douglass's arguments in these essays as starting points to reconstruct the capacities-based account of dignity he used to defend equal rights. In so doing, I contend that the idea of natural dignity functioned in his thought as a "moral bridge" between the descriptive claim that human beings have distinctive capacities and the political claim of rights.

Women, Douglass argued in the 1870 essays, have an "indisputable natural right to participate in government through the same channels and instrumentalities employed by men" (1950–75, 4:235). In order to defend this claim, he relied on two primary sets of arguments. First, he offered a series of "common good" arguments that focused on what the community loses by excluding virtuous women from participation in the political sphere. Second, he appealed to the idea of "natural dignity" no less than three times to defend the claim that—consequences aside—women have equal rights to participate in politics. In what follows, I focus on the latter set of arguments in order to bring out just how he used and defended the idea of dignity in his political rhetoric.

There are many passages in Douglass's writings and speeches on women's rights that can provide us with a basis for a discussion of natural dignity, but there is perhaps none more pregnant with meaning than the following lines from his 1870 essay "Woman Suffrage Movement": "If woman is admitted to be a moral and intellectual being, possessing a sense of good and evil, and a power of choice between them, her case is already half gained. Our natural powers are the foundation of our natural rights; and it is a consciousness of powers which suggests the exercise of rights. Man can only exercise powers he possesses, and he can only conceive of rights in presence of powers" (1950–75, 4:232–33). In this passage, we find Douglass identifying the rational capacity, the moral capacity, and the volitional capacity as the "natural powers" at the foundation of our natural rights. I will return to the significance of these capacities in a moment, but before I do so I must address the connection of these capacities and the idea of "natural dignity." Douglass wrote the second 1870 essay, "Woman and the Ballot" (published October 27, 1870), in order

to "adduce some reasons" in support of the claims—like those in the passage just cited—he made in the first 1870 essay entitled "Woman Suffrage Movement" (published October 20, 1870). As noted above, the two most prominent reasons he adduced are appeals to the common good and appeals to natural dignity. In the first essay, Douglass had already claimed that our "natural powers are the foundation of our natural rights," but it appears he felt his case was incomplete. Indeed, he said the case was only "half gained." One of the ways he tried to complete his case was by appealing to dignity repeatedly in the second essay (the idea does not appear explicitly in the first essay). In "Woman and the Ballot," Douglass argued that "to deprive [woman] of [the right to political participation] is to deprive her of a part of her natural dignity" or, as he puts it elsewhere in the essay, "it is plain that women themselves are divested of a large measure of their natural dignity by their exclusion from such participation in Government" (1950–75, 4:236, 237). Douglass's final use of "natural dignity" in the essay may provide us with the best explanation of just what he had in mind. The "natural dignity" of women, he wrote, is offended by her exclusion because she has "intelligence" and is "capable of intelligent preference for the kind of men who shall make the laws under which she is to live," and yet she is deemed "incapable of exercising the elective franchise" (1950–75, 4:237–38).

If we take the two essays together, we can see that Douglass was offering a comprehensive capacities-based account of human dignity and human rights or, in his language, natural dignity and natural rights. He began by identifying what he took to be several morally relevant "powers" possessed by human beings: rationality, moral understanding, and free will. The rational, moral, and volitional capacities of human beings, he argued, should lead us to conclude that they possess a certain "fitness for freedom" (1950–75, 4:237). Like the great thinkers who have defended dignity throughout history, Douglass identified several characteristics that distinguish human beings from other creatures and, crucially, appealed to dignity in order to make the claim that these characteristics have *moral significance*. Because human beings are rational, are capable of moral understanding, and have free will, they can—and should—be held accountable for their choices. This, Douglass argued, cannot be said of any other creature. These distinguishing characteristics take on a moral significance precisely because they empower human beings to reflect on how they ought to treat one another. Rational, moral, and volitional capacities have moral relevance in this context because they have a direct bearing on the human ability to participate in politics. Women, like men, are able to reflect on what morality requires, and they have the volitional capacity to act on the basis of those reflections. As Douglass says at the conclusion of the passage, the "presence" of these "powers" in human nature is what makes it possible for us to

even "conceive of rights." We are able to use our reason; in other words, to engage in moral reflection, on the basis of that reflection, we are able to reach an understanding of what morality requires of us, and we are free to choose whether or not we will act in accordance with those requirements. One of the most significant moral requirements we are able to discern, Douglass argued, is the requirement to respect the rights of others. "Rights," he said in a women's rights address in 1888, "do not have their source in the will or the grace of man." Instead, rights have their "foundation" in "the nature and personality" of human beings (1979–92, 5:383, 384).

As you can see from the language cited so far, several aspects of the nature and personality of the human being proved to be especially important to Douglass's case. The aspects he chose to emphasize echo many of the ideas of great defenders of dignity from throughout the history of Western philosophy. First, like Pascal, Douglass identified rationality, or intelligence, as a crucial capacity. The intelligence of woman is morally significant in this case, he argued, because this capacity allows her to form intelligent opinions of public officials and public policies, to contemplate her own interests, and—most importantly for Douglass—provides her with the capacity to acquire moral knowledge. This last point is vital. In discussions of natural dignity and natural rights, Douglass usually coupled the rational capacity together with the moral capacity in order to make the claim that human beings have moral worth that is entitled to concern and respect.

This point leads naturally into the second piece of Douglass's capacity-based account of human dignity: the moral capacity of human beings. You will recall from section 1 that this idea is especially prominent in the work of Kant, who believed that the dignity of human beings is closely bound up with their ability to think and act morally. While Douglass did not develop a comprehensive "metaphysics of morals" to support this proposition, its importance in his thought cannot be understated. As noted above, Douglass thought the rational and moral capacities were crucial to what he called "fitness for freedom." This is evident not only in his writings on women's rights but also in his abolitionist writings. During the Civil War, he responded to the oft-expressed worry about what was to be done with emancipated slaves by expressing this idea: "We are asked if we would turn the slaves loose. I answer, Yes. Why not? They are not wolves or tigers, but men. They are endowed with reason—and can decide upon questions of right and wrong, good and evil, benefits and injuries—and are therefore subjects of government precisely as other men are" (1979–92, 3:505). The fact that Douglass drew a comparison between men and beasts is an indication he is implicitly invoking the idea of *human* dignity. It is precisely because men can be distinguished from beasts in these ways that they are fit for freedom under civil government. As Doug-

lass put it just a few months after he delivered the words quoted above, "The foundation of all governments and all codes of laws is in fact that man is a rational creature, and is capable of guiding his conduct by ideas of right and wrong, of good and evil, by hope of reward and fear of punishment" (3:577). In the context of the debate over women's rights, Douglass made a similar argument:

> The question which should be put to every man and which every man should put to himself is, Who and what is woman? Is there really anything in her nature and constitution which necessarily unfits her for the exercise of suffrage? Is she a rational being? Has she knowledge of right and wrong? Can she discern between good and evil? Is she a legitimate subject of government? Is she capable of forming an intelligent opinion of public men and public measures? Has she a *will* as well as a mind? (1979–92, 5:253)

Douglass's last question—has she a will—brings us to the third capacity in his account, the volitional capacity, which he described as the "power of choice" or the possession of an independent will, as essential to the case for dignity. The significance of the volitional capacity is intertwined with the moral capacity. If we imagine that human beings had the capacity to discern right from wrong but lacked the freedom to choose which path to follow, both their rational and moral capacities would be less meaningful. In other words, if human beings are able to understand morality but have no ability to act according to its dictates, they seem less significantly different from creatures with no moral capacity. In the context of a discussion of slavery, Douglass went so far as to call choice "sacred" because it is a capacity available only to "free and responsible agents" who "in all matters of moral conduct" are free to decide for themselves how they will act (1979–92, 5:71). The significance of "the power of *choice*" in Douglass's thought cannot be understated. Whether his topic was rights or duties or virtues, he came back to the idea that "men have their choice in this world," and this fact has immense moral consequences (3:437).

Fourth, Douglass identified "individuality" as a "source" of the "great truths" animating the women's rights movement. It may seem odd to think of individuality as a "capacity," but further explanation of this idea should make it clear why this should be understood as an important part of his capacities-based account of human dignity. When Douglass spoke of individuality, he discussed both the "form and features" and the "thought and feeling" of individuals (1979–92, 5:255). During the debates over suffrage, he repeatedly asserted that the "selfhood" of each individual is "absolute" and "complete"

in the sense that each human being has a personality that is separate from every other human being. Each individual's personality—her intellectual faculties, moral capacities, capacity to choose, and sense of personal identity—is separate and distinct from every other's. Although his argument was not nearly as systematic, Douglass's idea of the "absolute" and "complete" selfhood of individuals is reminiscent of the idea of "temporal subjectivity" introduced in section 1 of this essay. In his sketch of a "theory of human dignity of a Lockean sort," political theorist Zuckert writes, "The identity of a person is the consciousness of the I—recognized as the same I as in the present consciousness, both backward in time via memory and forward in time via projection into the future" (2007, 44). Both memory and projection figured prominently in Douglass's understanding of human dignity. "Man," Douglass said in 1883, "is said to be an animal looking before and after. To him alone is given the prophetic vision enabling him to discern the outline of his future through the mists and shadows of his past" (1979–92, 5:56). In a speech just a year earlier, Douglass referred to the same passage from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to draw a direct connection between man's "temporal subjectivity" and his dignity: "Man is neither wood nor stone. He is described by the great poet, as a being looking before and after. He has a past, present, and future. To eliminate either is a violation of his nature and an infringement upon his dignity. He is a progressive being, and memory, reason, and reflection are the resources of his improvement" (5:45). One of the cruelest things about slavery, Douglass argued repeatedly throughout his abolitionist career, was the fact that it denied the slave the opportunity to think of himself or herself as a subject with some control over his or her past, present, or future. "Whipping," he said in 1855, "is not what constitutes the cruelty of Slavery. To me the thought that I am a slave is more terrible than any lash, than any chain. A slave to-day, to-morrow, next year, all the years of my life,—my manhood denied, ignored, despised,—this being eternally shut up to a single condition, no outgoing, no progress, no future, this is more horrible, more distressing than any whip" (3:11). The greatest cruelty of slavery, he seemed to be saying, is that it denies the individual the opportunity to conceive of himself as a progressive being who is free to pursue projects of his own choosing. In a women's rights speech decades later, Douglass reiterated this point in a different context when he argued that deeming woman "incapable of self-direction" is to treat her as "a body without a soul" (5:382). The soul of a human life, Douglass believed, was the capacity for self-direction, and the exercise of this capacity in the present is often informed by what one had done in the past and what one hopes to do in the future. Kateb's recent claim that we "begin thinking about the human dignity of individuals, their equal status, when we impute to every person this thought: I have a life to live; it is my life and no

one else's; it is my only life, let me live it" (2011, 19) captures the essence of what Douglass had in mind when he connected the idea of individuality to dignity.

Beyond the four capacities—rational, moral, volitional, and temporal subjective—that echo the ideas of earlier thinkers, Douglass's arguments for natural dignity and equal rights anticipate the ideas of twentieth-century philosophers in notable ways. In his famous essay "The Nature and Value of Rights," the philosopher Joel Feinberg argued that "what is called 'human dignity' may simply be the recognizable capacity to make claims. To respect a person, then, or to think of him as possessed of human dignity simply is to think of him as a potential maker of claims" (1970, 252). Although Feinberg did not discuss dignity in much detail in "The Nature and Value of Rights," he—like Douglass—thought it was of the utmost significance in his argument. The status of human beings as "potential makers of claims," Feinberg argued, is of "supreme moral importance" (252). In the imaginary land without rights (Nowheresville) he constructs in the essay, the inhabitants lack dignity; in Feinberg's words, they "do not think to leap to their feet and make righteous demands against one another" (249). There is something about the human capacity to make such demands that has profound moral significance. Indeed, this capacity is, in an important sense, the synthesis of the capacities discussed thus far. As rational, moral agents able to conceive of themselves as subjects that exist through time, human beings—unlike any other creature—are able to articulate claims against one another. In "Woman Suffrage Movement," Douglass formulated a similar argument about the significance of claiming (and its relationship to other capacities) when he said, "Man can only exercise the powers he possesses, and he can only conceive of rights in the presence of powers. The fact that woman has the power to say 'I choose *this* rather than *that*' is all-sufficient proof that there is no natural reason against the exercise of that power" (1950–75, 4:232–33). Human beings, in sum, are capable of conceiving of rights and making claims on the basis of those conceptions.

Douglass also anticipated the social-comparative dimension of dignity that has been emphasized by contemporary philosopher Allen Buchanan. According to Buchanan (2010), the capacities-based account of dignity falls short when it does not consider the context in which individuals are able to exercise their capacities. More specifically, we can make sense of what dignity means in a particular context only if we are sensitive to the power dynamics of that context. Buchanan worries about accounts of dignity that leave too much room for hierarchy and domination. Might it not be possible, Buchanan asks, to imagine contexts in which the rational, moral, volitional, and temporal subjective capacities of a particular group of human beings are recognized while they are at the same time subordinated by those with more power? Accord-

ing to Buchanan, the answer is yes, so a full account of dignity must have a "social-comparative dimension." In "Woman and the Ballot," Douglass seems to have considered this sort of concern. Just after one of his appeals to natural dignity, he addressed the social-comparative dimension of dignity that concerns Buchanan:

> Power is the highest object of human respect. Wisdom, virtue, and all great moral qualities command respect only as powers. . . . We pity the impotent and respect the powerful everywhere. To deny woman her vote is to abridge her natural and social power, and deprive her of a certain measure of respect. Everybody knows that woman's opinion of any law-maker would command a larger measure of attention had she the means of making her opinion effective at the ballot-box. We despise the weak and respect the strong. Such is human nature. (1950–75, 4: 237)

This is a fascinating shift in Douglass's use of the language of power in the 1870 essays. Just a week earlier, in the "Woman Suffrage Movement" essay, he called "natural powers"—which he previously described as rationality, moral understanding, and free will—the "foundation of our natural rights." In "Woman and the Ballot," he used "powers" in a different way. In the passage above, wisdom (the aim of our rational capacity) and virtue (the aim of our moral capacity) are conceived as powers with respect to how we are viewed and treated by other people. Douglass argued that we are not really thought to be worthy of respect if the social or political structure prevents us from exercising our "mental and moral power." Rational and moral capacities are not only "natural powers," Douglass contended, but also sources of "social power."

In Douglass's arguments for equal rights, dignity was not a superfluous middle term between "natural powers" and "natural rights." Instead, dignity is a vital moral term that attempts to build a rhetorical bridge between natural powers and natural rights. In other words, Douglass viewed "natural dignity" as the moral standing or moral worth that follows from our natural powers. This moral standing provides the basis for the moral claims we make on other people. It is because we have moral worth as human beings that we claim that certain things should not be done to us (e.g., we should not be killed or enslaved), and it is because of the moral worth we have as human beings that we should have rights equal to those of others (e.g., the right to access the same political "channels and instrumentalities" available to others). To say that we have this power or that power is not enough. In order to make a claim of rights, we must go beyond mere *descriptive* claims about human ca-

pacities to *normative* claims about the moral consequences that follow from such capacities.

3. THE DEMANDS OF DIGNITY: DOUGLASS ON DIGNITY AND DUTY

In 1883, Douglass visited the Metropolitan A.M.E. Church in Washington, DC, to deliver a lecture entitled "It Moves, or the Philosophy of Reform" to the members of the Bethel Literary and Historical Association. The speech is a remarkable manifesto on the individual's ability and duty to make the world a better place. Indeed, Douglass's thesis in the speech so emphasized human control over history that it raised the ire of at least one clergyman in the audience. According to historian John Blassingame, "Newspaper accounts of his philosophy of reform lecture praised his performance but reported a sharp debate at its end between Douglass and Reverend Walter Henderson Brooks." It seems that Brooks, who was the pastor of the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church, objected to several items in Douglass's speech, especially his claim that "the true philosophy of reform is not found in the clouds, or in the stars, or any where else outside of humanity itself" (1979–92, 5:124). Brooks objected, in Blassingame's words, to Douglass's claim that "it is men, not God or the prayers of men, that brought about change in the world" (5:137). "It Moves" is a speech, I contend, that is about the demands of, or the duties that follow from, dignity. While Douglass's general topic was the "philosophy of reform" and the speech is full of very broad and abstract language, we know (and his listeners knew) that the reforms that mattered most to him were those that concerned the dignity and rights of individuals. The speech is about our capacity and duty to make the world a better place—to make it a place in which man is brought "more and more into harmony with the laws of his own being" or, to put it another way, our capacity and our duty to make the world a place in which the dignity of all human beings is respected (5:135). In what follows, I reconstruct Douglass's arguments in the speech with an eye toward revealing what these arguments reveal about his views of the natural duties that arise from natural dignity and natural rights. Douglass, like all other natural rights thinkers, thought that individuals have a basic duty to respect the rights of others. But this is not the only demand of dignity. In addition, Douglass thought that the dignity of human beings imposes on all of us a general duty to combat injustice, understood here as the violation of natural rights. In order to make sense of how Douglass came to that conclusion, I now turn to the arguments he made in "It Moves."

Douglass began "It Moves" by acknowledging that "some very respectable writers and thinkers" argue that "reform is a delusion, a deceitful appearance;

that there is no such thing as making the world better." In addition to these "skeptical" writers, he said there are those who accept the "misanthropic view" that the world is "growing worse" (1979–92, 5:127). According to Douglass, "the essential nature of man" reveals the flaws in these "theories in denial of progress and reform": "It is . . . natural for man to seek and discover improved conditions of existence. . . . The very conditions of helplessness in which men are born suggest reform and progress as the necessity of their nature. He literally brings nothing into the world to meet his multitudinous necessities. He is, upon first blush, less fortunate than other animals. Nature has prepared nothing for him. He must find his own needed food, raiment and shelter, or the iron hand of nature will smite him with death" (5:129). It was in the next few sentences that Douglass transitioned to a discussion of dignity: "But [man] has a dignity which belongs to himself alone. He is an object not only to himself, but to his species, and his species an object to him. Every well-formed man finds no rest to his soul while any portion of his species suffers from a recognized evil. The deepest wish of a true man's heart is that good may be augmented and evil, moral and physical, be diminished, and that each generation shall be an improvement on its predecessor" (5:129). In order to make sense of this very rich passage, we should consider it in parts. First, when Douglass spoke of a "dignity" that belongs to man "alone," it is a clear manifestation of his capacities-based account of the idea. In other words, he was referring to the aspects of human nature that, as he puts it in another speech, "plant between [man] and the rest of creation, a distinction as eternal as it is palpable" (1950–75, 2:291). In the second sentence, Douglass's use of the word "object" is a bit cryptic. If we look at the third sentence, though, the meaning of the second sentence becomes clear. The dignity that belongs to man alone enables him to conceive not only of himself as a being with moral worth but also all other human beings. Well-formed human beings care about one another, Douglass argued, not because of mere instinct, but because they are able to identify reasons why they should care about one another. In other words, it is essential to our dignity that we are able to identify moral worth in one another. I return to this explicit invocation of dignity below, but before I do so, let us return to the trajectory of Douglass's argument in the speech.

The next step in Douglass's argument in "It Moves" was to offer his alternative to the skeptical and misanthropic views of progress described at the beginning of the essay. As an alternative to these views, he defended a theory of "perpetual conflict":

> An irrepressible conflict, grander than that described by the late William H. Seward, is perpetually going on. Two hostile irreconcilable tendencies, broad as the world of man, are in the open field; good and evil, truth

> and error, enlightenment and superstition. Progress and reaction, the ideal and the actual, the spiritual and material, the old and the new, are in perpetual conflict, and the battle must go on till the ideal, the spiritual side of humanity shall gain perfect victory over all that is low and vile in the world. (1979–92, 5:130)

Douglass applied this "perpetual conflict" theory of history to many spheres of life including the scientific and the religious. In the realm of political morality, though, the perpetual conflict theory has clear relevance for my topic in this essay. The forces of evil, superstition, and reaction will always pose a threat to the dignity of individuals. In addition to these nefarious forces, Douglass identified natural conservatism as another potential obstacle for progress toward a society in which the dignity of all people is respected. "Human nature itself," he wrote, "has a warm and friendly side for what is old; for what has withstood the tide of time and become venerable by age" (1979–92, 5:135). It is precisely because of this conservative dimension of human nature that Douglass argued that the reformer has "a difficult and disagreeable task" because he must seek to "advance against the vehement protests of the most sacred sentiments of the human heart" (5:136). In order for good, enlightenment, and progress to prevail, Douglass argued, it is necessary for conscientious human beings not only to combat the forces of evil but also to nudge along those individuals who resist change simply because it is different from what they know and, in some cases, might hold to be sacred.

In the next part of "It Moves," Douglass drew a connection between the dignity that belongs to man alone and his theory of perpetual conflict. It was at this point in the speech that he arrived at his central argument (and the argument, as I noted in the introduction to this section, proved to be most controversial): "It seems to me that the true philosophy of reform is not found in the clouds, or in the stars, or any where else outside of humanity itself. So far as the laws of the universe have been discovered and understood, they seem to teach that the mission of man's improvement and perfection has been *wholly committed to man himself*. So is he to be his own savior or his own destroyer. He has neither angels to help him nor devils to hinder him" (1979–92, 5:137). After endorsing this extraordinarily strong view of human moral agency, Douglass anticipated two objections. First, he admitted that some believe that "the power of faith" is more important in altering history than the power of human action. Indeed, some of these same people, he said, believe that scientific laws such as the "law of gravitation" may be "suspended or evaded" by faith. To this, Douglass was unable to offer much of a response since it is based on "outpourings of enthusiasm" instead of reason. "Some things are true to faith," he concluded, "which are false to fact" (5:138).

Second, Douglass acknowledged that some people would argue that his "view of this question" does "away with moral and spiritual law altogether, and leaves man without any rule of moral and spiritual life" (1979–92, 5: 138). In response, he said it was not he, but his critic, who was offering an argument that was offensive to moral law. "If it is admitted that there are moral laws," he said, "but affirmed that the consequence of their violation may all be removed by a prayer, a sigh or a tear, the result is about the same as if there were no law." Douglass was as strongly committed as anyone to the idea that natural moral law exists, but he thought such law could not be understood or enforced without human reflection and action. If one accepts his critic's view, faith "takes the place of law, and belief the place of life." This view must be rejected, he continued, because "it strikes at the fundamental principles of all real progress, and ought, by some means or other, to be removed from the minds of men." What is needed, Douglass argued, is recognition that "all genuine reform must rest on the assumption that man is a creature of absolute, inflexible law, moral and spiritual," that his "happiness and well-being can only be secured by perfect obedience to such law," and, perhaps most importantly for my purposes, it "is *given to man* to first discover the law and to enforce compliance" (5:139).

Douglass began his conclusion in "It Moves" with several philosophical reflections on the question "What Is Truth?" All the details of his arguments would take us too far afield, but it is worth noting that while he thought truth "contemplated as a whole" is "too great for human conception or expression," individual truths like "sparks from the great All-Truth" are "quite within the range of [our] mental vision" (1979–92, 5:140–41). Such is the "system of truths" underlying the "woman's movement" discussed in the last section. These truths, Douglass said in "Woman Suffrage Movement," are that as a "moral and intellectual being, possessing a sense of good and evil, and a power of choice between them," woman has "natural dignity" that ought to be respected (1950–75, 4:232). Once such a truth is discovered, Douglass said in "It Moves," it is "given to man" to see to it that it is "wisely applied" in the world. Without human "effort, work, either of body or mind," such a truth is of little value to human beings (1979–92, 5:141, 143). Our duty, Douglass concluded, "is to discover truth" and to work to "make our subjective consciousness" of truth "objective, in thought, form and speech" (5:143). One such truth is human dignity, and it is our duty to make our subjective consciousness of dignity an objective fact in the world.

In order to make sense of this last claim, it might be helpful to consider how Douglass developed a similar idea in a later speech on women's rights. In the 1888 speech called "Give Women Fair Play," he said, "When a great truth once gets abroad in the world, no power on earth can imprison it, or prescribe

its limits, or suppress it. It is bound to go on till it becomes the thought of the world. Such a truth is woman's right to equal liberty with man. She was born with it. It was hers before she comprehended it. It is inscribed upon all the powers and faculties of her soul, and not custom, law nor usage can ever destroy it" (1979–92, 5:355). We know from section 2 that Douglass believed that "woman's right to equal liberty with man" was rooted in the natural dignity of all human beings. This was, for Douglass, a great truth. If we apply the argument of "It Moves" to this particular truth, we reach the following conclusions. First, we have a moral duty to communicate this truth to our fellow human beings. It is our obligation to do so because this truth must go from being merely "fixed in the minds of the few" to becoming "objective, in thought, form, and speech." Second, Douglass believed we have a political duty to use the means available to us to enshrine this truth of natural justice into positive law. While the truth of the natural dignity of women cannot be suppressed, its realization in positive law is anything but a foregone conclusion.

The conception of duty suggested by Douglass's arguments in "It Moves" requires additional explanation because it seems to depart, in significant ways, from the conventional understanding of duty within the natural rights tradition. According to that understanding, "The right of one implies a duty on the part of others not to violate that right" (Zuckert 2007, 40). Put in a slightly different way, "One obvious idea is that our rights are constrained by respect for the rights of others. My rights correlate with your duties; your rights correlate with my duties" (Waldron 2011, 1110). "In this original sense of 'duty,'" writes the philosopher Joel Feinberg, "all duties are correlated with the rights *to* whom the duty is owed" (1970, 244). But Douglass seems to be using duty in a different way. His argument is that dignity leads to a general duty to combat injustice, or, as he puts it in "It Moves," we should have no rest to our souls while any portion of our species suffers from a recognized evil. According to Feinberg, this is not actually an altogether strange way to think about duty. There "seem to be numerous classes of duties," Feinberg suggests, "that are *not* logically correlated with the rights of other persons." There is, he continues, a category of "duties-without-correlative rights" such as "duties of charity" in which no particular recipient "can claim a contribution from us as his due" (244).

We are still left with an important question: how does Douglass's general duty to combat injustice "translate" into real politics? For the sake of clarity, let us think about this question in the context of individual rights. If individuals acted in accordance with what Douglass called "simple justice," they would observe the basic duty to respect each other's rights. Since individuals are often unwilling to observe this basic duty, it is the "solemn obligation and duty" of the government to protect the rights of individuals (1950–75, 3:499;

1979–92, 4:526). If the government fails to fulfill this duty, individuals have the right and obligation to reform it or replace it. Although Douglass's duty to combat injustice falls within the category of duties Feinberg called "duties-without-correlative rights," the language of rights is not altogether irrelevant. According to human rights scholar Henry Shue, individuals have rights to "effective institutions" to protect their rights. A "right has not been fulfilled," he argues, "until arrangements are in fact in place for people to enjoy whatever it is to which they have the right" (1996, 16). Shue says that the right to effective institutions to preserve rights does impose on others a general duty: "That a right involves a rationally justified demand for social guarantees against standard threats means, in effect, that the relevant other people have a duty to create, if they do not exist, or, if they do, to preserve effective institutions for the enjoyment of what people have rights to enjoy" (17). The rights of individuals to effective institutions impose on all of us a general duty to transform unjust institutions into just ones. It would be fair to say that Douglass's entire career as a reformer was devoted to promoting such transformation and to convincing others to join him in this righteous cause. The question of precisely how we are supposed to live up to our duty to combat injustice is enormously complex, and I am unable to do it justice in the space available here. Douglass argued that individuals should use the moral and political power available to them to challenge injustice by promoting just institutions at every opportunity. The precise nature of moral and political action one should take will depend on considerations of prudence and circumstance, but we must never forget, as he said in the context of slavery, "that there is no freedom from responsibility for slavery, but in the abolition of slavery" (1979–92, 3:173). If we generalize this statement into a principle of political morality, it amounts to what I am calling the general duty to combat injustice: there is no freedom from responsibility for injustice, but in the abolition of injustice. While this may seem like a fairly radical view, it seems clear that Douglass embraced it. Recall that in his discussion of his theory of perpetual conflict, he said that the "battle" between "good and evil . . . must go on until the ideal, the spiritual side of humanity shall gain perfect victory over all that is low and vile in the world" (5:130). The radicalism of the conception of duty at the heart of the "abolitionist imagination" has led some scholars to question its legitimacy as a lens through which to view political morality (Delbanco 2012). To this critique, I offer two brief responses. First, when Douglass applied this radical conception of duty into political practice, he usually tempered it with a good deal of prudence (Goldstein 1984; Ruderman 2003). Second, Douglass's duty to combat injustice might be thought of as an aspirational idea. As historian Aileen Kraditor has pointed out, when reading the rhetoric of the abolitionists, we must be careful

not to confuse "what is in principle obligatory and what is immediately realizable." The demand that human beings do far more than they are capable of was, according to Kraditor, a "consciously adopted tactic" of reform. The tactic "of always stating the principle toward which public opinion must be educated, no matter how far ahead of present public opinion it might be," was certainly operating in Douglass's radically idealist suggestion that we have a duty to battle until justice achieves "perfect victory" over injustice (Kraditor 1969, 31). Such perfection, Douglass may have recognized, could not be realized in the world, but it is still our duty to strive toward it.

In sum, natural dignity requires us not only to respect the rights of others but also to combat injustice by creating and maintaining just institutions. This is not a duty that correlates neatly with another individual's right but is rather a duty of a general sort. For Douglass, this duty emerges from the fact that the dignity of individuals will not be respected or protected unless human beings take responsibility for the achievement of these ends. The central lesson of "It Moves" is that it is the responsibility of individuals to use the moral and political means available to them to wisely apply moral laws in the real world. The rational, moral, volitional, and temporal subjective capacities of human beings empower us to do this work. According to Douglass's formulation, we have the capacity to use our reason to determine what morality requires, and our volitional capacity provides us with the ability to exercise our will to act on these moral truths. The temporal subjective capacity—the ability to think of oneself as a subject that exists through time—is also relevant. Recall that Douglass began "It Moves" by speaking of "well-formed" or "true" men who find no rest to their souls while their fellow human beings suffer from recognized evils. I do not think it would be too much to say that Douglass was constantly confronting his audiences with a stark existential question: just what sort of self do you want to be? Do you want to be a true human being who acts in ways consistent with your rational and moral capacities, or do you want to behave like an "outcast of humanity" who shows little or no capacity to treat others in ways consistent with their dignity (1950–75, 5:457)?

4. "THE DIGNITY OF STRIVING TO BE FREE": DOUGLASS ON DIGNITY AS A VIRTUE

So far, I have reconstructed Douglass's capacities-based account of human dignity and shown how it undergirded his arguments for individual rights and a general duty to combat injustice. I now turn my attention to Douglass's related use of dignity as a virtue. In addition to serving as a foundational claim

about moral worth or status that is based on natural capacities, dignity is often used to describe a "quality that manifests itself in human behavior or a virtue." A dignified person, in the words of Rosen, "is someone who *shows* dignity in their character or bearing" (2012, 6, 58). According to this account of dignity, "what gives one worth, and demands respect" is not merely the possession of particular capacities, but rather the use of those capacities in a way that brings about the "realization" of the "potential for virtue" (Donnelly 2009, 15). There is little doubt that "dignity as virtue" was an important idea in Douglass's thought, and this has significant implications for the interpretive claims I make in the conclusion. In this section, I argue that Douglass thought of dignity not only as the foundation of equal rights and our general duty to combat injustice but also as a form of virtue for human beings. This use of dignity is related to the capacities-based account of human dignity in the sense that Douglass believed we are able to demonstrate our dignity through the development of these capacities and by exercising them in particular ways. More specifically, he saw something dignified in striving to be free, in labor, and in the pursuit of intellectual and moral cultivation. It is to Douglass's discussions of these dignified forms of behavior that I now turn.

The first example of dignity as virtue I wish to explore is related to the discussion of "claiming" above. Recall that Douglass anticipated some of the arguments of the twentieth-century philosopher Joel Feinberg when he argued that there is something about the ability to conceive of and claim rights that lends support to the idea that human beings have special moral worth. Beyond just thinking of claiming as a capacity that demonstrates one is worthy of respect, Douglass thought of claiming as a dignifying virtue. This idea is presented clearly in an address Douglass gave in 1858 called "Citizenship and the Spirit of Caste." The address was delivered in New York City at a meeting held in protest of the Sixth Avenue Railroad's discrimination against African American passengers. Douglass began his address by acknowledging that some will think "the object which has brought us here will seem small and insignificant" and may even ask "what is the use of making a fuss about so small a matter, as the exclusion of anybody from a railroad carriage?" (1979–92, 3:208–9). In response to this question, Douglass said the Sixth Avenue Railroad's policies were, by themselves, grievously wrong, but furthermore, they must be challenged because they are a manifestation of "the cruel and malignant spirit of caste" that "is satisfied with nothing short of complete and perpetual degradation of the whole colored race in America" (3:208–9). In the face of this spirit of caste, Douglass argued that it is vital to resist, even if there is little hope for success. It was at this point in the speech when he invoked dignity:

> There is an impression which has settled down upon the pathway of those who labor for the rights and the elevation of our people, like the gloomy fogs upon the mariner approaching our perilous northern coast. This impression is, that we ourselves are unconcerned and even contented with our condition; that we, both slave and free, are unwilling to 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*. I detest the slaveholder, and almost equally the contented slave. They are both enemies to freedom. (1979–92, 3:210)

There is a certain dignity, Douglass seemed to be saying, in being recognized as a free person. Such recognition implies an acknowledgement of one's status as a human being with moral worth. In the absence of such recognition, Douglass argued, one could still demonstrate one's dignity through certain kinds of behavior. More specifically, he saw something essentially dignified in striving to be free. This anticipates Feinberg's idea that by "making righteous demands" about how one ought to be treated, an individual can demonstrate her dignity. Douglass's vision of the individual striving to be free captures what the philosopher Jeremy Waldron has in mind when he speaks of dignity as the "bearing" of "someone to be reckoned with," who refuses to be "abject, pitiable, distressed, or overly submissive in circumstances of adversity" (2012, 22). By standing up to injustice, the individual can show his oppressors and third parties that he is a moral agent who is capable of demanding respect. In other words, to act *with* dignity can serve as evidence that one *has* dignity. Douglass himself said he came to many of his own views about the dignity of women after he witnessed demonstrating their dignity. In an 1853 editorial on the women's suffrage activist Antoinette L. Brown, Douglass wrote,

> With her the right to vote is no abstraction, a right to be asserted not exercised; she means voting, and we confess, our inability to see any reason in favor of man's right to choose his law-makers that does not equally apply to the case of women. Her right rests on the same foundation with his, and is in no respect inferior to his. The calmness, serenity, earnestness, ability and dignity with which Miss Brown advocates this right, compels the serious and respectful attention of all whom she addresses on the subject. (Quoted in Foner 1976, 57)

In this case, Douglass said he saw merit in Brown's arguments—the sorts of arguments examined in section 2—but he also saw merit in the dignity with which Brown presented those arguments. In an editorial celebrating Elizabeth

Cady Stanton's seventieth birthday (in 1885), Douglass articulated a similar idea when he said that early in his career, his interactions with Stanton "clothed woman in my mind with a dignity and grandeur which I had not before recognized" (Foner 1976, 163).

The second and third examples of dignity as virtue I wish to discuss are Douglass's enthusiastic embrace of the dignity of labor and his endorsement of the cultivation of one's mind and soul as especially dignifying activities. What does it mean to speak of the dignity of one's labor? Douglass discussed the dignity of labor in many speeches, but there are no two better expressions of his views than his famous lectures "Self-Made Men" and "The Blessings of Liberty and Education." In both of these speeches, we find Douglass making the case for the worth, or value, of labor for the cultivation of character and as a means to the higher ends of intellectual and moral excellence.

In "Self-Made Men," a speech Douglass delivered more than 50 times between 1859 and 1893, he aimed to "awaken" in his audiences "a sense of the dignity of labor" and "the value of manhood" (1979–92, 5:575). This is an immensely rich speech, and I cannot possibly do it justice here, but what I hope to do in the next few paragraphs is to use the speech to bring out just what Douglass meant by *dignity* of labor. At the outset, Douglass offered this "definition" of self-made men: "Self-made men are the men who, under peculiar difficulties and without the ordinary helps of favoring circumstances, have attained knowledge, usefulness, power and position and have learned from themselves the best uses to which life can be put in this world, and in the exercises of these uses to build up worthy character" (5:549–50). Self-made men are individuals who have succeeded, in one way or another, without the benefits of being well born or socially privileged. "They are in a peculiar sense," Douglass said, "indebted to themselves for themselves" (5:550).

After offering this definition, Douglass explored various theories of the success of self-made men. He offered strong rejections of both the "good luck" and the "supernatural intervention" theories of self-made men. No theories were more at odds with Douglass's worldview than these. The good luck theory, he said, "divorces a man from his own achievements, contemplates him as a being of chance and leaves him without will, motive, ambition, or aspiration." Similarly, the supernatural intervention theory makes man "a very insignificant agent in his own affairs" (1979–92, 5:552–53). Douglass rejected the "celestial" explanation of human progress because he believed that God gave human beings free will to shape events in the world. The good luck and divine hand theories of self-made men are simply individualized versions of the celestial theory of human progress mentioned in the discussion of "It Moves" in section 3. "Faith," he said, "in the absence of work, seems to be worth little, if anything" (5:555). Douglass's rejection of the good luck and celestial theo-

ries of human success and failure is intimately related to his understanding of human dignity. He was offended by these views precisely because they divorce human beings from the significant achievements they secure through the free exercise of their capacities. There is, he thought, something deeply offensive about the idea that human "will, motive, ambition, or aspiration" counts for little or nothing.

Instead of good luck or divine intervention, Douglass contended that the success of self-made men can be explained "mainly by one word and that word is WORK! WORK!! WORK!!! WORK!!!! Not transient and fitful effort, but patient, enduring, honest, unremitting and indefatigable work, into which the whole heart is put, and which, in both temporal and spiritual affairs, is the true miracle worker" (1979–92, 5:556). Self-made men are, in short, embodiments of hard work, perseverance, determination, and self-reliance. Douglass summarized his theory of self-made men in the following way: "My theory of self-made men is, then, simply this; that they are men of work. Whether or not such men have acquired material, moral or intellectual excellence, honest labor faithfully, steadily and persistently pursued, is the best, if not the only, explanation of their success" (5:560).

With this definition and explanation of self-made men established, Douglass made a bold normative claim: self-made men "are entitled to a certain measure of respect for their success and for proving to the world the grandest possibilities of human nature" (1979–92, 5:550). In other words, Douglass believed that self-made men—men of work—provide models of the grandest possibilities of human nature. At the heart of "Self-Made Men" is a message that is intimately connected to his thesis in "It Moves." In "It Moves," Douglass made the case for the centrality of human agency in reforming the world in order to bring it closer to the objective recognition of human dignity. In "Self-Made Men," he made the case for the centrality of human agency in reforming the self in such a way that promoted the living of a valuable and worthwhile—or a dignified—life. In order to achieve this goal, he argued, one must be willing to work. This, for Douglass, is the dignity of labor.

But what should be the aim of this labor? Did Douglass believe that labor was, in itself, dignified, or did he believe the dignity of labor to be instrumental in nature? For Douglass, I do not think this was an either-or proposition. In order to make sense of his view, we must look at his 1894 speech "The Blessings of Liberty and Education" in which he offered an explanation of his "philosophy of work." In that speech, he began by making clear that he fully believed in "the dignity of all needful labor." Whatever "is needed to be done, it is honorable to do. . . . All honest effort to better human conditions," he said, "is entitled to respect" (1979–92, 5:619–20). But "menial service," Douglass said, should be a step toward something higher. Throughout many of his writ-

ings on dignity, we find him referring to man as a "progressive being." This view of man is at the core of his attitude toward labor. While most goals worth pursuing will require hard work of some sort, "it is nevertheless plain that no people, white or black, can, in any country, continue long respected, who are confined to mere menial service for which but little intelligence or skill is required, and for which but the smallest wages are paid or received, especially if the laborer does not make an effort to rise above that condition" (5:620). Douglass's more precise views of the dignity of labor are related to the capacities-based account of human dignity I have been describing throughout this essay. Although there is a significant amount of value in all labor, he argued, labor was especially valuable if it contributed—directly or indirectly—to the cultivation of the human mind. Labor can contribute directly to the cultivation of the mind if it forces the individual to think: "My philosophy of work is, that a man is worked upon by that upon which he works. Some work requires more muscle than it does mind. That work which requires the most thought, skill and ingenuity will receive the highest commendation and will otherwise do most for the worker. Things which can be done simply with the exertion of muscle and with little or no exertion of the intellect will develop the muscle, but dwarf the mind" (5:621). Labor can contribute indirectly to the cultivation of the mind by providing individuals with the material security necessary to pursue such cultivation, as he said in an 1873 speech "Agriculture and Black Progress":

> Accumulate property. Yes, accumulate property. This may sound to you like a new gospel. You have been accustomed to hear that money is the root of all evil; that it is hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of Heaven; that this world is of no account; that we should take no thought for to-morrow, and much more of the same sort. In answer to all of which I say: that no people can ever make any social or mental improvement whose exertions are thus limited. Poverty is our greatest calamity. . . . Property, money, if you please, will purchase of us the only condition upon which any people can rise to the dignity of genuine manhood; for, without property, there can be no leisure. Without leisure, there can be no thought. Without thought, there can be no invention. Without invention, there can be no progress. (1979–92, 4:393)

It is interesting to think about this passage alongside of Douglass's discussion of the dignity of labor in "Self-Made Men." In this passage, he seems to be saying we can only rise to the "dignity of genuine manhood" if we are at leisure, or free from work. It is only if we have leisure, he argued, that we can pursue thought, invention, and progress. How can this be squared with his

hope that the lecture on self-made men demonstrated the "dignity of labor and the value of manhood" (1979–92, 5:575)? Recall that he said self-made men can acquire "material, moral or intellectual excellence," but that whatever their object, "honest labor, faithfully, steadily and persistently pursued" will be essential. If we couple this idea with Douglass's arguments in "The Blessings of Liberty and Education," his message seems to be clear: all worthwhile goals require labor to be achieved, but the labor required varies in its nature and value. While all labor is in some sense dignified, labor that contributes directly or indirectly to the cultivation of the mind is of the most value.

Douglass's emphasis on the development of the mind reveals the link between his capacities-based account of human dignity and the role of "dignity as virtue" in his thought. On Douglass's view, the intellect is, in some sense, the foundation of dignity since it is through reason that we determine how we should behave (the moral capacity), whether we will behave in particular ways (the volitional capacity), and reason enables us to reflect on our selves as subjects that exist through time (the temporal subjective capacity). It is for these reasons that the cultivation of the mind is of the utmost importance to Douglass. This point is made clear in some of the most powerful rhetoric in "The Blessings of Liberty and Education": "In his natural condition . . . man is only potentially great. As a mere physical being he does not take high rank, even among the beasts of the field. He is not so fleet as a horse or a hound or so strong as an ox or a mule. His true dignity is not to be sought in his arms or legs, but in his head. Here is the seat and source of all that is of especially great or practical importance to him" (1979–92, 5:622). The next few lines in the speech provide another important link to the themes of "Self-Made Men." After establishing the "true dignity" of man's mind, Douglass proceeded to discuss the value of education:

> There is power in the human mind, but education is needed for its development. As man is the highest on earth it follows that the vocation of the scholar is among the highest known to man. It is to teach and induce man's potential and latent greatness. It is to discover and develop the noblest, highest and best in him. In view of this fact no man whose business is to teach should ever allow himself to feel that his mission is mean, inferior or circumscribed. In my estimation neither politics nor religion present to us a calling higher than this primary business of unfolding and strengthening the powers of the human soul. It is a permanent vocation. (1979–92, 5:622)

Perhaps the most interesting link between "Self-Made Men" and "The Blessings of Liberty and Education" is Douglass's use of the word "soul." In the

passage just sited, he referred to the process of education as the "business of unfolding and strengthening the powers of the human soul." From what Douglass said earlier in the passage, we can make sense of what he meant by this: to unfold and strengthen the human soul is to "teach and induce man's potential and latent greatness" by developing what is "highest, noblest and best" in his nature. We know from the account of human dignity that has been described throughout this essay that the related rational and moral capacities of human beings are what Douglass believed to be the highest, noblest, and best in human nature.

This view is confirmed when we look back at what Douglass had to say about soul in "Self-Made Men." After arguing that "honest labor faithfully, steadily and persistently pursued, is the best, if not the only, explanation of [the] success of self-made men," he turned his attention to other factors that contribute to their success: "Sound bodily health and mental faculties unimpaired are very desirable, if not absolutely indispensable. But a man need not be a physical giant or an intellectual prodigy, in order to make a tolerable way in this world. The health and strength of the soul is of far more importance than that of the body. . . . The soul is the main thing. . . . When the soul is lost, all is lost. . . . Let not the morally strong, though physically weak abandon the struggle of life" (1979–92, 5:561). It is in this last sentence that Douglass provided the clearest explanation of what he meant by soul: moral strength. If we go back to the language used in "The Blessings of Liberty and Education," we can get a better picture of Douglass's vision of a dignified human being. The true dignity of human beings is not to be found in our arms and legs, but in our minds and souls, or in our intellectual and moral capacities. The goal of education should be to cultivate our minds and our souls. Our minds are the "seat and source" of our "true dignity" not because they provide us with what we need to become intellectual prodigies but rather because they provide us with the capacity to learn what matters most: how we should treat other human beings.

5. CONCLUSION: DOUGLASS'S PHILOSOPHY OF DIGNITY AND THE IDEA OF REFORM LIBERALISM

In *The Lincoln Persuasion* (1993), J. David Greenstone suggested that Douglass was a "reform liberal" who was engaged in a "founding project," the goal of which was to extend the ideals of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution to all people (190). Greenstone's reading of Douglass as a "reform liberal" was, in the schema of his book, offered as an alternative to the "humanist liberalism" that has dominated American political culture. Both traditions of thought embrace certain liberal fundamentals such as individual

rights, toleration, and limited government. There are significant differences, though, in how thinkers within each tradition understand "the nature of the individual personality," "the character of human rationality and freedom," and "the obligations individuals and communities owe each other" (60). Humanist liberals, Greenstone argued, emphasize "utility," "self-interest," "instrumental rationality," liberation from restraint (negative liberty), and the "satisfaction of individual preferences" (whatever they may be, as long as they respect the rights of others). Reform liberals, on the other hand, embrace a "positive" conception of liberty that holds an individual cannot be truly free unless she is free to "cultivate and develop [her] physical, intellectual, aesthetic and moral faculties," and they hold that all individuals have duties to help others cultivate these faculties. Greenstone said reform liberals utilize a "form of reasoning that is not instrumental but principled" (36, 53–55). By this he meant that reform liberals believe that reason is not merely an instrument to be used to determine the best means for the individual to achieve his ends (whatever they might be) but, more importantly, a capacity that allows individuals to assess the moral legitimacy of means and ends.

Unfortunately, Greenstone passed away before he was able to complete the chapter on Douglass that was supposed to be included in *The Lincoln Persuasion*. He left us with only the brief suggestion of this reading of Douglass, which was included in an introductory section included in the book. By way of conclusion, I would like to provide a brief explanation of how the foregoing discussion of Douglass's philosophy of dignity lends support to Greenstone's reading of Douglass as a reform liberal. Indeed, I contend that Douglass's capacities-based account of dignity and its implications for his views of rights, duties, and virtues provide some of the strongest evidence available to support this interpretation.

First, consider Douglass's defense of equal rights on the foundation of his capacities-based account of human dignity. According to Greenstone, humanist liberals, men like Stephen A. Douglas, argued that (at least some) individuals should be "secure in their rights" because they are the best "judges of their own happiness" and the role of the state is to establish conditions that will allow individuals to pursue their goals without interference (1993, 223). While there is an element of this "negative liberty" idea in Douglass's thought, his view of rights has a moral dimension that is missing from the humanist liberal perspective. For Douglass, the exercise of freedom is not merely about the satisfaction of preferences. In addition, it is about being empowered to exercise one's rational, volitional, temporal subjective, and—most importantly—moral capacities. The exercise of these capacities is significant not only because it allows individuals the opportunity to pursue the satisfaction of their preferences but also because it provides individuals with the oppor-

tunity to develop those capacities. In the context of the debate over women's rights, for example, Douglass believed that a woman's right to vote is important not only because it empowered her to express her preferences for policies and candidates but, furthermore, because it would empower her to augment her own sense of "dignity and importance" (1979–92, 5:262).

Second, Douglass's dignity-based philosophy of duty has all the markings of reform liberalism, which Greenstone also called "humanitarian liberalism" (1993, 244). In Greenstone's typology, humanist liberals believe that individuals have one major duty: "respect the rights and abilities of others to set and meet their own goals" (59). Reform liberals, on the other hand, embrace a robust "humanitarian ethic" that holds individuals responsible for combatting injustice and promoting a state of affairs in which all individuals can develop their distinctively human capacities. According to the reform liberal formulation, injustice consists of both the deprivation of basic rights and the denial of "opportunity for intellectual and moral development" (248). In "It Moves" and related writings, Douglass made it perfectly clear where he stood on the question of duty. Indeed, his entire public life was devoted to the humanitarian principle at the core of reform liberalism. According to this principle, we not only must respect the dignity of others by refraining from violating their rights but also must seek to protect their dignity by combating injustice and creating institutions that will promote the security of their rights and the cultivation of their capacities.

Finally, Douglass's ideas on dignity as virtue fit well within the reform liberal tradition. For Douglass, the dignity of striving to be free, the dignity of labor, and the dignity of intellectual and moral cultivation were all rooted, to some extent, in his capacities-based account of human dignity. The dignity of striving to be free is a perfect illustration of Feinberg's idea of the dignity of making "righteous demands," and it is, in an important sense, a powerful synthesis of the rational, moral, volitional, and temporal subjective capacities. Labor was, for Douglass, dignified because it provided individuals with the opportunity to use their faculties to work to accomplish worthwhile goals, provided individuals with direct opportunities to cultivate their faculties, and indirectly promoted the cultivation of faculties by providing individuals with the material security needed to pursue thought, invention, and progress. Douglass's embrace of moral and intellectual cultivation as the source of man's "true dignity" is a clear manifestation of his reform liberalism. Indeed, the importance of the cultivation of moral and intellectual faculties is the idea that Greenstone identifies as the distinguishing feature of reform liberal thought. Furthermore, although I did not explore it much here, there is strong evidence to suggest that Douglass's humanitarian ethic (which is discussed mostly in connection to

rights in this essay) included the reform liberal idea that all individuals have duties to assist others in the cultivation of their intellectual and moral faculties.

As Frederick Douglass used his voice and his pen to try to persuade his audiences to rethink their conceptions of rights, duties, and virtues, he developed a thoughtful and complex philosophy of dignity. The natural powers of individuals are evident to all who are not blinded by intractable prejudice, and the existence of these powers makes it possible for us to conceive of an important moral idea: human beings have dignity, and because of that dignity, we should treat them in particular ways. Because not all human beings will act in accordance with this powerful moral idea, Douglass argued, it is up to conscientious individuals to vindicate human dignity through moral and political action. In addition to humanitarian efforts, dignity can be vindicated by individuals themselves who strive to be free in the face of oppression, and it can be further demonstrated through labor and, most importantly, through the pursuit of intellectual and moral excellence. As contemporary scholars continue to grapple with meaning and political implications of dignity, they would do well to consider the ideas of Douglass, who devoted his nearly 6 decades in public life to articulating and defending a vision of human dignity that was profound and, in many ways, prophetic.

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