

Frederick Douglass: Power, Privilege, and Patriotism
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There may be nothing more contentious than the three words I've been asked to discuss with you tonight—power, privilege, and patriotism—and that was also true in Frederick Douglass's own lifetime. Then, as now, how we think about power and privilege is inextricable from how we think about the scope and significance of patriotism.

To my knowledge, Douglass never called himself a patriot. But he was insistent—even emphatic—that he was a *citizen*. That was not just a title he was proud of, but one that he demanded on behalf of himself and millions of his enslaved countrymen. And he did so in the face of a system of power and privilege vastly more oppressive and cruel than anything most Americans today have ever known.

He told an audience in 1853, four years before *Dred Scott*, nearly a decade before the Civil War, “By birth, we are American citizens; by the principles of the Declaration of Independence, we are American citizens; within the meaning of the United States Constitution, we are American citizens; by the facts of history...we are American citizens; by the hardships and trials endured; by the courage and fidelity displayed by our ancestors...*we are American citizens.*”¹

He said this at a time when more than three million black Americans were enslaved based on a proto-totalitarian racist ideology that proclaimed that they were fit only for servitude, and that anyone who disputed this—who argued they were by nature free and independent human beings vested with individual rights—was a naïve fool.

Why did citizenship matter so much to Douglass? What did it represent to him? I ask this not as a biographer, but as a political philosopher, for while Douglass was a fascinating and heroic man in his own right, he was also one of America's most insightful philosophical analysts. No American intellectual left us a more profound insight into the ethical, psychological, and political nature of slavery and freedom than Frederick Douglass.

Sadly, this remains an underappreciated aspect of his legacy. Worse, in fact: Douglass's political philosophy is often misrepresented or even scorned by scholars today who find it uncongenial to their own beliefs. Philosopher Charles Mills, for example, characterizes Douglass's arguments in favor of black citizenship as “dubious” and “bizarre” “misrepresentation[s].”² Scholar Waldo Martin regards Douglass's support for *laissez-faire* capitalism as proof that he was ignorant and immature.³ Biographer David Blight calls Douglass's constitutional views “arbitrary” and says his support for the union in the Civil War was motivated by “bloodthirsty” “fantasies of revenge.”⁴

Meanwhile, schools that do teach students about his life, disregard his work as a public intellectual. Students read the short version of his memoir, and are rarely assigned his articles and speeches. This leaves many unable to understand the full scope of his ideas. But I believe that Douglass's conception of citizenship crystallized a deeply considered, rigorously thought-out political philosophy—one that addressed these three questions of power, privilege, and patriotism, in ways from which we have much to learn today.

So let us consider Douglass's philosophy by understanding a little of the man himself. He was born into slavery on a Maryland plantation in 1818. He never saw his mother after the age of seven, but was instead sent to live in Baltimore with Hugh and Sophia Auld, relatives of his owner. Sophia, a young wife unfamiliar with the ways of slavery, began teaching him to

read, but was swiftly corrected by her husband. Teaching a slave to read was dangerous, said Hugh—it would start young Frederick thinking, and make him want to run away.

Douglass, overhearing this, immediately decided to become literate by any means necessary. He tricked neighborhood boys into teaching him the alphabet, and gradually improved until he could read the anti-slavery articles in Baltimore newspapers. Hugh Auld was right: learning to read was, for Douglass, one of the first steps toward liberation.

“[I was] early to inquire into the origin and nature of slavery,” Douglass tells us. “Why are some people slaves and others masters?”⁵ It seemed to him that the institution was not a natural one, but a conventional one—that is, it was not based on the needs of human living but on arbitrary rule and terror, and while masters sometimes claimed slaves were contented, in reality they were either miserable, or worse—were prevented from even asking such questions by a system of oppression that blotted out their conscious lives as much as possible. In other words, slavery represented a world based not on nature, but on *power*—not on reason, but on *will*.

Violence, Douglass observed, was only one of the many ways by which slave masters imposed their will on others. They wanted not only to make enslaved people obey commands; more fundamentally, they wanted to eradicate their victims’ *selves* entirely—to obliterate their individuality and merge them into the masters’ *own* selves.

That was why they didn’t just dole out cruel punishments for disobedience, but also did the reverse: Douglass tells us that masters often punished slaves for obeying *too well* or for working *too hard*. If a slave suggested a labor-saving way to accomplishing a task, he would be labeled “uppity,” and the master would punish him in order to destroy any spark of self-esteem on a slave’s part. And during holidays, Douglass says, masters virtually insisted that their slaves celebrate to excess, and especially that they get drunk. “Everything like rational enjoyment was frowned upon,” he says, “and only those wild and low sports peculiar to semi-civilized people were encouraged.”⁶

What was the masters’ goal in doing this? Douglass says there were two: first, to let off the tension that might otherwise have boiled over into outright revolt, and second, to “disgust the slaves with their temporary freedom”⁷—that is, to make them view liberty not as an essential ingredient in human flourishing, but as a senseless, pointless experience, and insignificant in the long run. Discouraging enslaved people from relishing their freedom, from developing their intellects, from improving themselves, from planning in the long term, or devoting themselves to time-consuming projects, benefitted the masters. “It was the sober, thoughtful slave,” Douglass says, “who was dangerous and needed the vigilance of his master to keep him a slave.”⁸

Note that Douglass is not just saying that masters benefitted from keeping slaves inebriated. He is also explaining the perverse nature of slavery itself. It flourished most when the humans involved *failed* to realize their highest potential.

Slavemasters sought to keep slaves ignorant not merely to prevent uprisings, but because the institution of slavery is inherently contrary to that quality that makes humans special: their rational capacity. “To make a man a slave,” Douglass explained, you must first “blunt, deaden, and destroy the central principle of human responsibility.”⁹ Slave masters did this by destroying the victim’s ability to imagine, to anticipate, or to discipline himself. Slavery, in short, requires the crippling of the individual human mind.

This led Douglass to his next important discovery: that any person who practices the virtue of personal pride possesses a spark of freedom that no master can extinguish. He learned this from what became the most famous incident in his life. In 1834, the sixteen-year-old

Douglass became so rebellious that his owner decided to teach him a lesson. So he sent Douglass to the farm of Edward Covey, a man widely admired as a slave-breaker.

Covey's job was to make Douglass into a confirmed slave. To accomplish this, he imposed a regimen of savage and arbitrary control—brutal beatings, randomly delivered, combined with incomprehensible rules and commands to do things that were impossible. The point of all of this was to obliterate a slave's sense of self—to make him incapable of even imagining or hoping for a better future—to make the world appear as nothing but a series of unpredictable dangers, and to eliminate the capacity for long-term thinking or independent judgment.

In short, the point was to destroy Douglass's sense of himself as an autonomous human being. Covey's farm was a sort of primitive re-education camp, and the techniques he used would be perfected and mass-produced in the twentieth century in the Communist gulags of Russia, China, and North Korea.

Like the victims of those regimes, slaves were often denied any reasonable explanation for the rewards and punishments they received. Such arbitrariness was essential, because once any individual mind obtains a grasp upon the world, by understanding the results that flow from causes, that mind has begun, however feebly, to gain an independent comprehension of the universe. And that autonomy—that ability to figure things out for oneself—is the seed from which self-esteem, self-assertion, and self-liberation can grow. This is why tyrants always ultimately make war upon the truth.

When, for example, Edward Covey ordered Douglass to lead a team of oxen out to the field—a task Douglass did not know how to perform—and then beat him with a wooden club for failing, it was precisely *because* such punishment was arbitrary and irrational that it was doled out. Covey's cruelty was intended to take Douglass out of the world of reason and put him in a world of power—of unpredictable terror and mindless obedience. A person who has no capacity to plan, to think, to dream, to believe, or to choose, is inherently pliant to serve as a tool for the master's will.

And Douglass tells us that it worked. After weeks of this brutality, he “was completely wrecked, changed, and bewildered.”¹⁰ He ceased to think about being a free person, ceased to think about the future at all. “Covey succeeded in *breaking* me—in body, soul, and spirit,” Douglass says. “My natural elasticity was crushed; my intellect languished; the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died out; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me, and behold a man transformed to a brute!”¹¹

Douglass's description of this experience brings to mind a classic image from the literature of twentieth century totalitarianism. You will recall the passage in George Orwell's novel *1984*, when Mr. O'Brien tortures Winston Smith to get him to say that O'Brien is holding up five fingers when in fact he is only holding up four. Why does he do this?

Because at that point, Smith is still insisting upon the intransigence of reality and upon the sovereignty of his own mind. Smith still believes that the objective truth is an inescapable fact of the universe and that his mind is capable of comprehending that unchangeable order. But Big Brother cannot tolerate that idea. Why? If there are such things as objective truths, then they would limit his power. If Winston can hold fast to reality, then he can stand upon that reality, and that would imply that he has control over something that is forever beyond Big Brother's reach: that is, the autonomy of his own mind. That, in turn, would mean that there is some value in the world, however miniscule, that transcends Big Brother's rule.

That is why O'Brien must force Winston to say he is holding up five fingers, and to actually *believe it* and *accept it* as being no more or less true than the number four. "We shall crush you down to the point from which there is no coming back," he tells Winston. "We shall squeeze you empty, and then we shall fill you with ourselves."¹²

That aptly describes Edward Covey's efforts to break Frederick Douglass. Although more rudimentary than the techniques of Lenin, Stalin, or Mao, the philosophical essence was the same: to squeeze Douglass's mind empty—to eradicate his essential autonomy—and to fill it with the commands of the master.

The reason I invoke Orwell is that few other writers have written so profoundly of the threat posed by the principle of *power*. Power, that is, as opposed to *reason*. What Douglass learned at Covey's farm—and what Winston is forced to unlearn in Room 101—is that there is a qualitative difference between what I call the world of *nature*, which is comprehended by *reason*, and the world of *power*, which is governed by *will*.

The world of nature—the world of objective reality and our rational comprehension of it, is not *dictated* by the human mind, but *understood* by it. It is metaphysically independent of our consciousness. It cannot be changed by wishes or commands. That sometimes frustrates us, because we would like to control reality by some kind of magic spell. But the objectivity of the world is actually a great blessing, for it gives us a fundamental and permanent grip upon our lives—a ground to stand on when things seem insane. We can always stand upon the truth.

By contrast, in the world of *power*, everything is said to be a "social construct," meaning that it can be altered by our conscious thoughts, or by the will of those who rule. This sometimes seems liberating, because it tells us that there are no limits to our moral capacity and that we can make the world better if we only believe it strongly enough. In this view, institutions are created by the powerful, at the expense of the weak, and we can revolutionize the world and make it better if only we believe hard enough...or if only we are *forced* to believe hard enough. After all, in this world of power, in which everything is a function of the will, the world's evils must ultimately be our own fault.

If reality is a social construct, then evil must be the result of somebody's evil will; and ultimately *you* are to blame, because you have not *believed* hard enough in what we today call "alternative facts." If there is no objective difference between five fingers and four, then the whole world can be changed by forcing people to say it's changed. That is why the idea that reality is a social construct is always accompanied by persecution and hysteria.

The first vision I described—the world of *nature* governed by *reason*—is a realm of persuasion. There, we regard others as essentially our equals. They are thinking creatures too, and to obtain their cooperation, understanding, fellowship, or love, we must appeal to their reason, talk with them, make contracts with them, and respect their rights. The world of nature is premised on the idea that each person is an independent being. In this world, there are things that are intransigent to power or force. You cannot, for example, compel someone to love you, just as you cannot compel four to equal five. You cannot force the poor to be rich. You cannot force ugliness to be beautiful. You cannot force men to be women. You cannot force your team to win the Superbowl.

By contrast, the other world, the world of *power*, is governed by *will*. In that world, there is no reason to regard others as our equals, for they and their needs and desires are only relevant insofar as they hinder or assist our will. The individual is either an obstacle to the attainment of our wants, or a tool for us to control. Since everything is just a social construct, everything from the contents of our minds, to our social institutions, to the laws of scientific discovery, to human

relationships, to justice itself, can be changed by an act of sheer will. Anything that seems *not* to be a mere creation of society's will—even mathematics or science or love—can still be “deconstructed” to prove that they, too, are only power-relationships—and therefore subject to our control.

This world of power is a totalitarian world. You are not sovereign over your own mind, because your very identity is a product of society—a consequence of social forces or your ethnic or historical background. And if everything is susceptible to *power*, then you need not respect others or appeal to their reason—because that is futile. Instead, you can only force them, or pressure them, or terrify them, or silence them. Everything else is swept away, and we are left with only one concern: how to control other people.

George Orwell shows us that world of power in *1984*. The basic premise upon which Big Brother's totalitarianism is built is that the world can be viewed exclusively in terms of power. This is what gives Big Brother his strength, and it is why he must transform all other forms of abstraction—whether a scientific theory or love—into power. That explains why, for example, Winston Smith's affair with Julia is forbidden. Love is not actually a relationship of power—which means Big Brother cannot really control it. Therefore, he must destroy it, or—what is the same thing—“deconstruct” it and “reimagine” it as if it *were* a relationship of power. Only by “deconstructing” anything that is not built of power—especially the individual's sovereignty over himself—can Big Brother and his servants squeeze Winston empty, and refill him with their own will.

In describing his experiences at Covey's farm, Douglass shows us that American slavery was very much the same thing: its basic premise was that we live in the world of power governed by will. To make a person into a slave, said Douglass, “you must bore out his intellectual eye—blind him to his humanity—for the slaveowner well knows that while there is a spark of the divinity in his soul, he cannot reckon upon keeping him a slave.”¹³

In short, the institution of slavery required the overthrow of reason. That was why masters discouraged “rational enjoyment,” forced slaves to pretend they were happy, and even counterfeited love by pretending that their slaves were members of their family.

I want to be clear about this distinction between the world of power governed by will and world of nature understood by reason, because it is so central to comprehending not just Douglass's life, but his vision of freedom and his relevance to us today. Since slavery rested not on reason but on will, it was perpetuated both by physical terror, and by a program of propaganda and censorship that forbade criticism or debate about slavery, and fashioned arguments in favor of bondage based on religion or history, against which no dissent was tolerated.¹⁴ Some of slavery's advocates tried to pretend that the institution did not represent the mere exercise of will and compulsion, and that it was the dictate of God or of biology. But slavery's most forthright champions were quite open about the fact that their ideal rejected the principles of reason entirely and was premised instead upon sheer power.

Foremost among these was John C. Calhoun, who championed slavery as a “positive good.” Calhoun's argument was based upon his rejection of the very idea of individuality. Human beings, he said, are not inherently individuals but are instead innately *social*. They are born belonging to a collective—to the tribe or the state—and *it* decides whether to give them freedom. Explicitly rejecting the philosophy on which the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were written, Calhoun argued that freedom is not a fact of nature, as the founding fathers believed, but an act of will by the state. And that meant that it made no sense to ask

whether slavery was just or unjust, because justice is simply whatever society decides to call justice.¹⁵

Other advocates of slavery such as George Fitzhugh and Henry Hughes agreed. They developed a theoretical defense of slavery that emphasized the collective nature of society and the beneficence of the peculiar institution. The pro-slavery ideology they created was the very first anti-capitalist ideology in America. They distinguished between the “free society”—that is, the capitalist society, which was governed by the rational principles of economics—and the slave society, or, in Hughes’ more polite term, the “warrant society,” which was governed by the spiritual values of what they called “sociology.”

“Sociology” was the opposite of economics because where the principles of economics are rational, the principles of sociology are instinctual and emotional. Where the individual in economics pursues his own self interest, the member of a slave society acts out of concern for others—he seeks social stability, hierarchy, responsibility, a sense of belonging. Society dictates the role of every individual. Every person knows his place. Nobody is left behind. And each receives what he deserves thanks to the benevolent will of society’s rulers.

In the free society, wrote Hughes, “distribution [of wealth] is not by the function of justice or the state,” but is “accidental,” meaning, it is the consequence of free individual decisions.¹⁶ But in the slave society, “the distributor [of wealth] is the state.... Wages are warranted. Their quantity is essentially just.”¹⁷

George Fitzhugh was even more explicit: capitalism was rooted in the evils of individualism and selfishness, he said, while the anti-individualist slave society will provide for all. “A vulgar adage, ‘Every man for himself, and devil take the hindmost,’ is the moral which liberty and free competition inculcate,” he claimed.¹⁸ But slavery—which he called “the best and most common form of Socialism”¹⁹—was premised on the belief that individuals are only creatures of society in the same way insects belong to hives. “Man is born a member of society,” he wrote. “He has no rights whatever as opposed to the interests of society; and...society may very properly make any use of him that will redound to the public good. Whatever rights he has are subordinate to the good of the whole, and he has never ceded rights to [society] for he was born its slave, and had no rights to cede.”²⁰

The point of all this is that the brutality and terror upon which slavery rested was only the surface manifestation of its basic premise: that the individual—the black individual primarily, although Fitzhugh also said white men should be enslaved—belongs to others and not to himself. That principle was based on the idea that everything about a person’s life—his rights, belongings, desires, and social position—are all constructed as an act of will on the part of society as a whole.

Douglass’s experiences in slavery reveal the real impact of these principles. It was because he rejected the idea that he belonged to somebody else that he was sent to Covey’s farm to be squeezed empty. Covey’s brutality was intended to demolish his individuality, and to transform him into an instrument governed not by reason and comprehensible principles but by the master’s will—to make him only an insect in a hive. That is what Douglass meant when he said the “first business of the enslaver of men” was to “destroy the central principle of human responsibility.”

To accomplish this, one must make that person view the sovereignty of his or her mind as a fiction—in essence, to say there are five fingers instead of four. All the techniques of enslavement had *this* central theme: they were meant to destroy a person’s belief in a world of

nature understood by reason, and replace it with a belief in a world of power governed by the master's will.

This poisonous idea necessarily extended to every corner of slave society: "The very law of [slavery's] existence is growth and dominion," Douglass wrote.

Natural and harmonious relations easily repose in their own rectitude, while all [relationships that] are false and unnatural are conscious of their weakness, and must seek strength from without. Hence the explanation of the uneasy, restless...anxiety of slaveholders.... Truth may be careless and forgetful, but a lie cannot afford to be either. Truth may repose upon its inherent strength, but a falsehood rests for support upon external props. Slavery is the most stupendous of all lies, and depends for its existence upon a favorable adjustment of all its surroundings. Freedom of speech, of the press, of education, of labor, of locomotion, and indeed all kinds of freedom, are felt to be a standing menace to slavery. Hence the friends of slavery are bound by the necessity of their system...to subvert all liberty, and pervert all the safeguards of human rights.²¹

Slavery was inherently totalitarian.

If slavery's essential nature was to obliterate the world of reason and replace it with the world of power—and in the process to eradicate anything not created by the master's will—then what was freedom? For Douglass, freedom was a precisely defined ideal: it meant one's capacity to think for oneself and develop one's character to the fullest as one's rational desires prescribed.

Douglass explained this in, of all things, a series of lectures he delivered in the 1860s on the subject of photography. Douglass was fascinated by photography, and loved having his picture taken. In fact, he was the most photographed American of the nineteenth century. But he also spoke about its philosophical nature—of what it means about humanity that we make photographs and paintings.

Making pictures, he thought, was a manifestation of our unique capacity to project "[our] subjective consciousness into [an] objective form."²² In other words, to express our own values, ideals, and perspectives. It was therefore the quintessential expression of individualism. "A single living human soul," he said, "looking away with wondering eyes...possesses far more powerful and ever enduring attractions than all other objects real or imaginary."²³

Picture making—the capacity both to articulate our individuality and to comprehend and express the world around us—marked humanity's most "noble and generous" qualities.²⁴ By the "cultivation of [our] faculties, and by the development of natural and external resources," he believed, we "possess[] the marvelous power of enlarging the margin and extending the boundaries of [our] own existence."²⁵ And slavery's greatest evil was that it made war upon this capacity—that it "denied" "three millions of human beings" "the right to improve themselves."²⁶

Now, I have said that there is a world of power governed by will, in which the individual is only a tool of whatever power controls that will, and, on the other hand, a world of nature understood by reason in which the individual has the ability to comprehend—an ability that is inherently individual, and which gives us an anchor to reality with which to resist oppression. This is another way of saying that human individuality is a fact of nature which cannot be evaded. It is the rock upon which tyranny must always founder.

Douglass said this when he said slavery is a “stupendous lie” that cannot withstand exposure to the truth. The truth he had in mind was each person’s inescapable sovereignty over him- or herself. “There is an insuperable difficulty in creating slavery by law,” he said. “Man is the owner of himself; the right to himself is inseparable from himself, and no power beneath the sky can take it from him. He may be whipped, gagged, degraded, and kept in ignominy; but while a single spark of the divine vitality is left in him, while a ray of manhood beams from his eye, he has his rights as a man.... The upshot of all abolition teaching...[is] that man is his own.”²⁷

That principle—that a person belongs to himself or herself and not to others—is the essence of freedom. By contrast, the perverse logic of the pro-slavery argument—the logic of power—holds that there are no such things as individual rights, certainly not the right to own oneself. Instead there are only permissions—temporary privileges granted to the individual by society, based not on reason but mere will.

“Look at the condition of the slave,” Douglass said.

Stripped of every right—denied every privilege, he had not even the privilege of saying “myself”—his head, his eyes, his hands, his heart, his bones, his sinews, his soul, his immortal spirit, were all the property of another. He might not decide any question for himself.... The master...assumed the right to decide all things for him—what he should eat, how he should eat, what he should drink; to whom he should speak, what he should speak; for who[m] he should work and under what circumstances; when he should marry, to whom he should marry, and how long the marriage covenant should continue.... [Masters] took upon themselves to determine for the slave what was right and what was wrong.... The slave had no interest in himself—he had no right to himself.²⁸

In short, the slave lived like an insect in a hive just as George Fitzhugh said. Slaves had no right to their own selves because there were no such things as rights in the world of power—only privileges doled out by the state to serve its own desires.

Today’s versions of slavery still rest on this idea—which is why Douglass is a hero not just to black Americans, but to people of entirely different backgrounds. In 2007, a young woman named Yeonmi Park escaped from North Korea, arriving two years later in South Korea, where she entered school. There, she read Douglass’s writings. His 1848 essay “Letter to my Old Master” particularly resonated with her.

In that essay, written a decade after he escaped from slavery, Douglass emphasized this essential principle of self-ownership. “I am myself; you are yourself,” he told his former owner. “You are a man, and so am I.... I cannot breathe for you, or you for me; I must breathe for myself, and you for yourself. We are distinct persons, and are each equally provided with faculties necessary to our individual existence. In leaving you, I took nothing but what belonged to me.”²⁹ Reading these words, Park says in her 2015 memoir, she felt herself wanting to write her own letter to North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un. “Maybe, like Douglass, I would tell him that I was a human being,” she says. “He didn’t own me anymore. Now I owned myself.”³⁰

Sadly, even in America, the slavemasters’ attitude toward freedom is still promoted by many intellectuals today, who say that all rights, including our rights to free speech, private property, economic and personal decisions, even our rights over our own minds and bodies, are mere conventions—mere legal fictions created by the occult processes of society.

Foremost among these are today's advocates of so-called "privilege theory," who view all claims of what they call "deservedness" as socially constructed. To quote one contemporary college textbook that takes this perspective, individual rights do not "'exist' in an objective form"—rather, "we are constantly negotiating and renegotiating rights in our daily lives and our interaction with others...through an ongoing dialogue about what should constitute a common or shared humanity." Consequently, "rights are not static but will vary over time and in different cultures."³¹

According to this theory, our possessions, beliefs, and even our personalities, are given to us by society, and our moral claims over these things can therefore be changed by an act of political will. The fact that one person owns a house and another person does not is a consequence of social choices. Society has somehow "allowed" that person to have the house, and "denied" that "privilege" to others.

But if all institutions are social constructs governed by will, and rights vary over time based on what others want, then we cannot complain that we've been deprived of anything when society decides to enslave us.

This nonsense was the opposite of the view Frederick Douglass took. His belief—rooted in the classical liberal tradition of John Locke and Thomas Jefferson—was that all human beings at all times and in all cultures, have a fundamental, unalterable human nature—manifested in their inescapable individuality—what he called the "spark of divinity"—and that this is the source of our moral claim to self-ownership, a right that belongs to every person in the world.

This self-ownership is the source of our other rights, and these are not mere social conventions, but moral facts of human nature. We do not "negotiate" or "renegotiate" our rights in *any* respect. On the contrary, to "negotiate" them is to deprive them of their meaning, because doing so inherently concedes that others may justly deny or override our self-ownership. To negotiate with slaveholders necessarily meant accepting the legitimacy of their claims. To put it another way, if something must be negotiated, then it isn't a *right*, only a privilege—one society can revoke just as easily as it grants it.

Douglass's great lesson in this principle also came at the hands of Edward Covey. In August 1834, halfway through his time at the slave-breaker's farm, Douglass at last decided to resist. Working in the field one day, he suffered heat stroke, and Covey beat him with a stick for fainting. Douglass later managed to walk several miles to town to beg his owner for mercy, but the man refused, and he was forced to return to Covey's farm. Covey sprang upon him and began bludgeoning him again. Douglass had had enough.

"Whence came the daring spirit to grapple with [this] man...I do not know," he said. "At any rate, I *was resolved to fight*."³² He struck back and the two men struggled for hours. At last, Covey stumbled away, defeated. And he never beat Douglass again. "I was a changed being after that," Douglass says in his memoir. "I was *nothing* before; *I was a man* now...and inspired...to be a *free man*."³³

Standing up to Covey was a transformative moment for Douglass because it represented a supreme act of self-responsibility—of self-assertion—of an uncompromising insistence upon his right to himself, a right not given to him by anybody else, but which he claimed as his own.

"Resisting [Covey]," he writes, "was a resurrection from the dark...tomb of slavery, to the heaven of comparative freedom. I was no longer a servile coward...but my long-cowed spirit was roused to an attitude of independence.... This spirit made me a freeman in *fact*, although I still remained a slave in *form*."³⁴

Whether he won the fight or not didn't matter. What mattered was that he had believed himself worthy of defense—worthy of a self-directed life—and had acted upon that belief. *That* kept his spirit free. To be beaten physically, he wrote, was a “less deplorable” fate “than the living and lingering death to which cowardly and slavish souls are subjected.”

Douglass put this lesson to work twenty years later during the Civil War when he helped enlist former slaves and free black northerners into the Union Army. What's remarkable about his work as a recruitment officer is that he virtually *never* urged black Americans to join the military to *serve their country*. Such an idea would likely have struck him as absurd. Slaves owed nothing to their country, which had abused them in the worst imaginable way. Instead, his arguments for enlistment were rooted almost entirely in considerations of *pride*.

In his 1863 article “Why Should a Colored Man Enlist?” he gave several answers, but *never* suggested that black Americans should serve out of self-sacrifice. On the contrary, he urged them to join the fight because “You are a man...and whatever concerns man should interest you. He who looks upon a conflict between right and wrong, and does not help the right against the wrong, despises and insults his own nature.” Black Americans were entitled to citizenship and to “the honor of aiding in defense of the land of [our] birth”—an honor that had been denied them before, but which they should now insist upon.

Joining the military would stand as a refutation of racial prejudice, too. “Men set down your submission to slavery and insult to a lack of manly courage,” he wrote. “You should...disprove the slander, and wipe out the reproach.” Military service would help slaves “recover [their] own self-respect.” “You have to some extent rated your value by the estimate of your enemies and hence have counted yourselves less than you are,” he said. “You owe it to yourself...to rise from your social debasement and take your place...a man among men.... You will stand more erect, walk more assured, feel more at ease, and be less liable to insult than you ever were before.... You [will be] defending your own liberty, honor, manhood, and self-respect.”³⁵

At *no point* did Douglass suggest that black Americans owed the nation a duty to die on its battlefields. When biographer David Blight says Douglass “asked black men to offer their selfless blood for country,”³⁶ he says the opposite of the truth. It was the United States that owed it to black Americans to allow them to “assert their ability” by fighting for *themselves*.

As these words indicate, Douglass did not view rights through the lens of today's fashionable “privilege” lingo. A person's rights are not given to that person by society or the state. Nor do we “earn” our rights. We have a right, after all, to things we have *not* earned—for example, our own bodies. And because we aren't required to *earn* our rights, or to “negotiate” for them, there was no sense in saying people should join the army out of a sense of “owing” something to the state. Quite the reverse: freedmen should join the army as an expression of self-esteem. To prove to themselves and their enemies that they would not consent to live without liberty.

I have spoken so far of Douglass's view of *power*—that it was the essence of slavery, as opposed to reason, which was the essence of freedom—and of his view of *privilege*: that our rights are not social constructs but inherent in human nature. But what I have said should also indicate the answer to the third question presented today: that of patriotism. Douglass viewed citizenship as rooted, not in a mere emotional feeling of belonging, or in any sense of obligation to the state, but in the pride of free individuals. What made American citizenship special in Douglass's mind was that it was *not* a form of subordination or servitude, but belief in a set of

principles. America was—or was supposed to be—a union of free people brought together on the basis of mutual respect for each person’s individuality.

The nation obviously fell far short of this ideal—but that was a reason to strive harder to realize it, not to give it up.

This was why Douglass spoke in support of open immigration in an 1869 speech in which he explained his vision of America: “Every nation...has a definite mission in the world,” he said.

Ours...is to make us the perfect national illustration of the unit and dignity of the human family.... Our *greatness*...will be found in the faithful application of the principle of perfect civil equality to the people of all races and of all creeds, and to men of no creeds. We are not only bound to this position by...our revolutionary antecedents, but by the genius of our people. Gathered here, from all quarters of the globe by a common aspiration for rational liberty...it would be madness to set up any one race above another.³⁷

American citizenship meant participation in something special: in what he called “a government based upon the broadest and grandest declaration of human rights the world ever heard or read.”³⁸ But that government could only exist as long as people *believed* in its principles, and held them dear. *Cynicism*—an abandonment of ideals, which is the intellectual foundation of what I have called the world of power governed by will—would destroy it.

“If human nature is totally depraved,” he said, “if the character of this government will inevitably be the expression of this universal and innate depravity, then...[w]e should abandon our Republican government, cease to elect men to office, and place ourselves squarely under...some...potentate who governs by divine right.”³⁹ Far from being naïve, Douglass’s idealism represented his profound understanding that people act upon their beliefs, which makes it crucial that their beliefs be grounded in just and sound principles.

Douglass therefore stands at the opposite end of the spectrum from today’s prophets of cynicism, such as Ta-Nehisi Coates, who tell us that the U.S. is a fundamentally and irrevocably racist nation, that black Americans are doomed, and that hope for improvement is a childish superstition.

In his book *Between the World And Me*, Coates heaps contempt not only on the American Dream—but on the very idea of dreaming itself, as if it were a stupid and preposterous thing. He argues that black Americans should give up dreaming and confine themselves instead to what he calls the “cold steel truths of life”⁴⁰ and the “small hard things,”⁴¹ and view themselves, in his favorite phrase, as “black bodies.” At the conclusion of his book, he decides that the “great error” of his youth was “not that I had accepted someone else’s dream, but *that I had accepted the fact of dreams.*”⁴² He urges us instead to narrow our mental horizons to the direct and tangible—to “see discord, argument, chaos, perhaps even fear, as a kind of power.”⁴³

There’s that word *power* again. What Coates means by such fake eloquence is that American ideals of equality and liberty are a sham, and that America is a nation specifically devoted to racism and oppression. White supremacy, he says, “remains, as it has since 1776, at the heart of this country’s political life.”

We know what Douglass would have said about this, because there were people in his own day who made a similar argument, urging black Americans to abandon the country and start

colonies in Central America or Africa. He emphatically rejected this idea. “The worst thing...about this...nonsense,” he said,

is, that it tends to throw over the Negro a mantle of despair. It leads him to doubt the possibility of his progress as an American citizen.... [It] make[s] him despondent and doubtful, where he should feel assured and confident. It forces upon him the idea that he is forever doomed to be a stranger and a sojourner in the land of his birth, and that he has no permanent abiding place here.⁴⁴

Douglass would have despised Coates’s revealing phrase “black bodies.” After all, it was never their *bodies* that were in doubt—it was their minds. And what Douglass so bravely vindicated was not his body, but his right to the sanctity of his own personality. It was because America was fundamentally premised on *that* right that America was good, in his eyes.

In fact, he recognized that America’s fundamental principle is not racism, but equality. The proposition that all men are created equal, he said, is the “ringbolt in the chain of [our] nation’s destiny.” Black Americans were included in that, of course—indeed, they were more American than whites in some ways. They had built a life on this continent despite obstacles more extreme than white Americans had ever faced. They had proven their mettle by fighting in war to keep the United States together. They had loved America before America loved them. It would be the cruelest betrayal to deprive them of the dream for which they had struggled—and an even crueler betrayal to persuade them to abandon that dream.

Coates and his admirers pride themselves on being “realistic.” But there is nothing realistic about embracing the lie that America is only for white people—a belief which Coates and the Ku Klux Klan share—or the falsehood that the world is governed not by love or truth or principles, but by *power*. Coates has fooled himself into thinking that because he refuses to dream, that proves he’s awake. What it really proves is that he is a sleepwalker. God forbid the young people of this nation ever embrace the nihilism he teaches, for as the poet Vachel Lindsay said,

It is the world’s one crime its babes grow dull...
Not that they starve, but starve so dreamlessly...
Not that they die, but that they die like sheep.⁴⁵

That is why Douglass thought of citizenship as a badge of honor, available to all who accepted America’s foundational principles, without regard to race. The effort to make those principles a reality is never ceasing, but it is in that noble work that we reveal our worthiness as free people. To abandon that task—to swallow, as Coates does, the racist lie that America is a white nation, and that people of other races can never hope to have part in it—is a betrayal not only of truth but of our very selves.

Frederick Douglass believed in a world in which we are free to make the most of our unique gifts, to rise by grit, honor, and hard work—a world in which truth mattered more than power, in which individual rights meant more than mere privileges—and in which American citizenship represented a commitment to make a society where each of us can realize our potential through our own struggle for freedom. For generations, that dream has been shared by countless Americans of all races, and thanks to our nation’s foundational principles, we have made astonishing progress toward making the dream real—more in each succeeding generation.

President Obama put the point well when he said, “I believe we can keep the promise of our founders, the idea that if you’re willing to work hard, it doesn’t matter who you are or where you come from or what you look like or where you live. It doesn’t matter if you’re black or white or Hispanic or Asian or Native American or young or old or rich or poor, able, disabled, gay or straight, you can make it here in America if you’re willing to try.”⁴⁶

That is the Dream. It is a dream that could not be destroyed by the slave masters or by Jim Crow or by Bull Connor or by Hitler or Stalin or Mao, and it certainly must never be surrendered. “We are not as cynical as the pundits believe,” said Obama.⁴⁷ And we must never be.

¹ “The Claims of our Common Cause,” July 1853, in Philip Foner & Yuval Taylor eds., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2000), 264 (emphasis added).

² Charles Mills, *Blackness Visible* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 182.

³ Waldo E. Martin, *The Mind of Frederick Douglass* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986).

⁴ David Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*, (New York: Simon & Schuster 2018), 215, 345-46.

⁵ Henry Louis Gates Jr., ed., *Douglass: Autobiographies* (New York: Library of America, 1994), 498.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 596.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 596-97.

⁹ Lecture on Slavery, Dec. 1 1850, in Taylor & Foner, eds., 167.

¹⁰ Gates ed., 574.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 572.

¹² George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (New York: Penguin, 1983), 228-29.

¹³ “The Skin Aristocracy in America,” Feb 2, 1847, in J.W. Blassingame, ed., *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews, Volume 2: 1847-1854* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 3.

¹⁴ “A wise master did not take seriously the belief that Negroes were natural-born slaves,” writes Kenneth Stampp. “He knew better.... In most cases there was no end to the need for control.” Kenneth Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Vintage, 1956), 144.

¹⁵ John C. Calhoun, Speech on the Oregon Bill, June 27, 1848,

<https://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/oregon-bill-speech/>.

¹⁶ Henry Hughes, *Treatise on Sociology* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo & Co., 1854), 289.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 287.

¹⁸ George Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South* (Richmond: A. Morris, 1854), 229.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 72.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

²¹ “The American Apocalypse,” June 16, 1861, J.W. Blassingame, ed., *The Frederick Douglass Papers Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews Volume 3: 1855-1863* (Yale University Press, 1986), 444.

²² John Stauffer, et al., *Picturing Frederick Douglass* (New York: Norton, 2015), 132-33.

²³ *Ibid.*, 152.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 153.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 158.

²⁶ “Slavery as it Now Exists in the United States,” Aug 25, 1846, in J.W. Blassingame, ed., *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews Volume 1: 1841-1846* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 345-46.

²⁷ “Slavery the Live Issue,” Apr. 11-13, 1854, in J.W. Blassingame, ed., *The Frederick Douglass Papers Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews Volume 2: 1847-1854* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 462-63.

²⁸ “Slavery as it Now Exists in the United States,” 344-45.

²⁹ Gates Jr., ed., 414.

³⁰ Yeonmi Park & Maryanne Vollers, *In Order to Live* (New York: Penguin, 2015), 257.

³¹ Jim Ife, *Human Rights and Social Work: Towards Rights-Based Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 15-16.

³² Gates Jr., ed., 588.

³³ *Ibid.*, 591.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ “Why Should A Colored Man Enlist?” April 1863, in Foner & Taylor, eds., 528-33.

³⁶ Blight, 394.

³⁷ “Our Composite Nationality,” Dec. 7, 1869, in J.W. Blassingame & John R. McKivigan IV, eds., *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews Volume 4: 1864-1880* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 252-53

³⁸ “There Was A Right Side in the Late War,” My 30, 1878, in Foner & Taylor, eds., 631.

³⁹ “I Am A Radical Woman Suffrage Man,” May 28, 1888, in J.W. Blassingame & John R. McKivigan IV, eds., *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews Volume 5: 1881-1895* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 387.

⁴⁰ Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 52.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 56 (emphasis added).

⁴³ Ibid., 52.

⁴⁴ “Why is the Negro Lynched?” in Foner & Taylor, eds., 769.

⁴⁵ Vatchel Lindsay, “The Leaden-Eyed,” <https://www.bartleby.com/71/1323.html>

⁴⁶ Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President on Election Night,” Nov. 7, 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/11/07/remarks-president-election-night>

⁴⁷ Ibid.