The Facts and the Philosophy

Frederick Douglass as Political Thinker

Introduction

By 1860, Frederick Douglass's patience was wearing thin. After spending nearly two decades as an antislavery activist and enduring the many setbacks of the 1850s—the congressional compromises, the *Dred Scott* decision, the execution of John Brown—he admitted to reaching a “point of weary hopelessness.” The American people, he wrote, claim to accept the “civic catechism of the Declaration of Independence” and yet with three million people held in bondage around them, they are not moved from “the downy seat of inaction.” Douglass argued that the persistence of this “terrible paradox” was not due to a “failure to appreciate the value of liberty,” but rather because the American “love of liberty” was “circumscribed by our narrow and wicked” selfishness.¹

Douglass devoted his near six decades as an orator, writer, and public official to convincing his fellow Americans to purge this narrowness and selfishness from their love of liberty. His aim, in short, was to persuade the American people to accept a new liberal creed that would replace narrowness with egalitarianism and selfishness with humanitarianism. His life’s mission, he said in 1888, was “to hasten the day when the principles of liberty and humanity expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the constitution of the United States shall be the law and the practice of every section, and of all the people of this great country without regard to race, sex, color, or religion.”² This book is about the political philosophy that animated his mission. I argue that Douglass believed his goals could only be accomplished if the classical liberal commitment to individual rights was coupled with a robust conception of mutual responsibility. Two ideas were at the core of his political thought: a belief in universal self-ownership and a commitment to a doctrine he called “true virtue.” According to the idea of universal self-own-
ership, every human being is the “original, rightful, and absolute owner of his own body,” and according to the doctrine of true virtue, each individual has extensive obligations to stand up for the rights of others. Douglass’s embrace of these foundational ideas was rooted in the experience of slavery and his quest to abolish it. His hatred of the cruelties of slavery led him to an acute appreciation of the importance of individual rights, and the challenges he confronted as an abolitionist led him to believe that an ethos of “each for all and all for each” was necessary to secure these rights.

I believe an exploration of Douglass’s political thought is worthwhile for two major reasons. First, Douglass was a prominent and unique voice in one of the most important periods in American political history. The problem of slavery raised fundamental questions about the nature of the American polity. What are the foundations and limits of democratic authority in the United States? What rights do individuals possess? Are individual rights universal? What obligations do individuals have to one another? By drawing on his experiences as a slave, Douglass was able to offer a distinct perspective on these and other basic questions of political philosophy. He set himself apart from most of his contemporaries by defending a far more inclusive and morally demanding liberalism. Unlike so many of his predecessors and contemporaries, Douglass’s natural rights philosophy was truly universal in its application and his “outsider” status pushed him to articulate a much more urgent view of the obligations individuals have to one another. Second, I believe the spirit of Douglass’s ideas continues to be relevant to contemporary debates about political theory and practice. We are confronted, as Douglass was, with problems that cannot be addressed by the language of liberty alone. Instead in discussions of public philosophy and policy, contemporary citizens and statesmen are grappling with how to balance our commitment to rights with a greater sense of the obligations we have to others. As we confront the myriad challenges of our age, we would do well to reflect on the ideas of Frederick Douglass, who in the face of some of the biggest political crises this country has ever confronted, attempted to show that the promises of freedom are more likely to be realized in communities of responsible individuals.

Frederick Douglass: A Life of Agitation and Service

Although relevant moments in Douglass’s life will come up again and again in what follows, this is not a work of biography and my analysis proceeds thematically rather than chronologically. The details of Douglass’s life have been ably described by Douglass himself and by a number of excellent histo-
rians. Before discussing Douglass’s political thought, though, I would like to provide a brief description of his life. He was born into slavery in Tuckahoe, Maryland, in 1818. Over the course of the next twenty years, he experienced the full spectrum of slavery from the relative freedom of life as a “city slave” in Baltimore to the horrors of life on a plantation run by the infamous “slave-breaker” Edward Covey. At age 20, Douglass escaped from slavery and spent a brief period working as a common laborer in Massachusetts. Within a few years of attaining his freedom, he was “discovered” by the abolitionist leader William Lloyd Garrison and joined the abolitionist lecture circuit. Soon after joining the circuit, he faced a problem: his oratorical skills so impressed his audiences that many began to doubt whether or not he truly was “a graduate of the peculiar institution.” This (among other things) led his Garrisonian mentors to attempt to rein in their new colleague. “Give us the facts,” John A. Collins instructed Douglass, “we will take care of the philosophy.” Douglass did not take this advice, and the American political tradition is all the richer for it.

Douglass spent the 1840s and 1850s agitating on behalf of abolition. He lectured widely, authored autobiographies describing his life as a slave, and edited abolitionist newspapers—The North Star from 1847 to 1851, Frederick Douglass’ Paper from 1851 to 1860, and The Douglass Monthly from 1860 to 1863. In his speeches and writings, Douglass drew on his experiences as a slave and his study of natural rights philosophy in an attempt to convince his listeners and readers of the evil inherent in the slave system. In addition, Douglass lent his skills of persuasion to other progressive causes such as women’s suffrage, temperance, the abolition of capital punishment, equal rights for immigrants, and universal public education.

During the Civil War, Douglass used his voice and his pen to push President Abraham Lincoln and other Republican leaders to acknowledge that the conflict was about slavery and could not be resolved without the abolition of that institution. In addition, once he felt that the war was being waged for the right reasons and when he became convinced that black soldiers would be granted equal pay and treatment by Union commanders, he used his influence to recruit on behalf of the Union cause. After the war, Douglass continued his work as a progressive reformer, turning his attention to achieving equal citizenship for freedmen as well as continuing to speak and write in favor of the causes listed above.

During the 1870s and 1880s, Douglass established himself as a staunch supporter of the Republican Party. His support was rewarded with several opportunities to serve in Republican administrations. First, in 1871, he was...
selected by President Ulysses S. Grant to serve as secretary to a commission charged with the task of investigating the annexation of Santo Domingo. Then, in 1874, Douglass was again called into service by President Grant, this time to serve as the president of the Freedman’s Saving and Trust Company, an institution established to provide financial assistance to freed slaves. In 1877, Douglass was appointed by President Rutherford B. Hayes to serve as U.S. Marshal in the District of Columbia before he was appointed to become Recorder of Deeds for the District in 1880. Douglass’s last appointment came when he agreed to serve as American consul-general to Haiti from 1889 to 1891. Douglass continued to agitate on behalf of progressive causes until the day he died. On February 20, 1895, he attended a meeting of the National Council of Women in Washington, D.C. Shortly after he returned home to prepare to lecture that evening, he collapsed and died instantly.9

Like many other important figures in the history of American political thought, Douglass never published a comprehensive treatise of political philosophy. Over the course of his public career, though, he did produce three autobiographies, thousands of speeches and editorials, and volumes of correspondence from which we can cull a fairly coherent picture of his answers to many central normative questions in politics. In this book, I attempt to reconstruct that picture. In so doing, I have tried to be mindful of the fact that Douglass was not, first and foremost, a philosopher. Instead, Douglass is most often viewed, quite rightly, as a reformer and statesman. When interpreting his writings and speeches, then, it is necessary to keep in mind that he was a political actor who was attempting to achieve particular objectives. As such, although my analysis proceeds thematically instead of chronologically, I have tried to be mindful of the contexts in which Douglass was writing and speaking. While it is vital to keep these contexts in mind, my primary aim in this book is to explain the core commitments of Douglass’s political philosophy, which I contend was remarkably consistent over time. I invite the reader, then, to think of Douglass as a sort of philosophical statesman. He was a political actor whose ideas were to some extent conditioned by the demands of the politics of his time, but he was an actor who remained faithful to a set of core ideas. My hope is that this book will provide readers with a deeper understanding of those core ideas. I am not the first to offer an interpretation of Douglass’s political thought; so before proceeding to my argument, it is appropriate to say something about the interpretations offered by others.
Situating Frederick Douglass in the American Political Tradition

In *The Political Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson*, Garrett Ward Sheldon describes three approaches to the study of political ideas:

1. the historical approach, which examines the language used by a society to discuss political problems;
2. the political science approach, which studies the role of political language in political activity; and
3. the approach of political philosophy, which, more abstractly, examines the concepts in past political ideas and their relation to other theories found throughout the history of Western political thought.

This study of Douglass’s political thought draws on all three approaches, but relies most heavily on the third. When I began this project I was motivated, at least in part, by a desire to address what I took to be a glaring lack of scholarly attention to Douglass as a political philosopher. The canonical interpretations of the American political tradition failed to even mention Douglass and, at the time I began this project, there had not been a book-length study of Douglass published by a political theorist. Sometimes gaps in the literature are there for good reason, but I did not believe this was the case for Douglass. After all, how could it be that one of the most prominent Americans of the nineteenth century, a man who was deeply engaged in the most important moral and political battle of that century, was so ignored by political theorists?

Although Douglass had been ignored in the canonical interpretations of American political thought produced in the twentieth century and did not become the subject of a book-length study by a political theorist until almost a decade into the twenty-first, the cupboard of research on Douglass as a political philosopher is not completely bare. Indeed, like many other iconic figures in American political history, his political philosophy has been a matter of interpretive dispute. As you will see in my argument in chapter 3, in one sense the categorization of Douglass’s political philosophy is simple: he was a liberal. This is only noncontroversial, though, if we adopt a general definition like the one offered by political theorist Judith Shklar. “Liberalism,” Shklar wrote, is a “political doctrine” with “only one overriding aim: to secure the political conditions necessary for the exercise of personal freedom.” If we adopt this sort of broad definition, then it is fair to say that most American political thinkers are within the liberal tradition.
American political thought have pointed out, it is precisely for this reason that we must dig deeper into the liberal tradition in order to appreciate the diversity that exists within it. Scholars of American thought have divided the liberal tradition in a variety of ways, but perhaps the most basic division is between “classical” and “reform” liberalism. According to political theorist Kenneth Dolbeare, classical liberals emphasize self-reliance, natural rights, private property and limited government intervention in social and economic affairs. Returning to the language used in Shklar's general definition above, classical liberals believe the conditions are met for the exercise of personal freedom when a limited government protects the rights of individuals to life, liberty, and property. Reform liberals share the classical liberal belief in individual rights, but worry about whether or not genuine freedom can be exercised under conditions of economic and social inequality. Reform liberals contend that true liberty can only be realized in communities that empower individuals to fulfill their potential. This empowerment, reform liberals contend, comes from individuals feeling a greater sense of obligation for one another's well-being than classical liberalism seems to demand, and from a willingness to accept government intervention in social and economic life in order to promote greater equality.

Interpreters are divided on how to classify Douglass, but the majority identifies him with the classical liberal tradition. Interpreters in this majority connect him to the contemporary political spectrum by contending that he is best thought of as the founding father of black conservatism in the United States and hear his arguments echoed on the contemporary right from thinkers like Thomas Sowell, Shelby Steele, and John McWhorter. According to this reading, the defining features of Douglass's political morality are his commitments to natural rights, limited government, and a self-help individualism that would later be popularized by Booker T. Washington in the early twentieth century, and celebrated by Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas in our own time. Another set of interpreters identifies Douglass as a thinker who was keenly aware of the myriad forms of inequality that threaten the exercise of personal freedom and, as such, embraced a political philosophy that departed significantly from the core tenets of classical liberalism. Before proceeding, I would like to provide brief sketches of each side of this interpretive divide.

In her short book *American Citizenship*, political theorist Judith Shklar offered an interpretation of Douglass as a classical liberal. Douglass is a central figure in Shklar's arguments throughout the book, but of particular interest for my purposes is her discussion of Douglass in the context of the late-twentieth-century “ideological conflict” over social welfare programs.
One side accuses its opponents of being a paternalistic elite who want to eliminate poverty by paralyzing the helpless poor. The second group charges the other side with being harsh populist achievers who blame the victims unfairly, and who in disregard of actual conditions and needs simply want to put everyone to work for a tiny wage and to no good end.  

Shklar calls the latter group “the defenders of the helpless poor” and the former group the “party of individual effort.” The defenders of the helpless poor, representing the left of the political spectrum, view the poor as “social victims who are being denied racial equality, opportunities for decent work and education, and access to normal public goods.” Douglass’s ideas, Shklar contends, are on the other side of the divide: “The opposing party of individual effort, like Frederick Douglass, hopes that the government will do nothing more than ensure fair play for all. Anyone who truly wants to work, they argue, can find employment, and with it will come standing and self-respect.” Douglass’s party, Shklar says, sees the “defenders of the helpless poor” as a “threat” to “the values of work and independence.”

In *On Hallowed Ground*, intellectual historian John Patrick Diggins reaches a conclusion similar to the one reached by Shklar. In his analysis of “Black America and the Liberal Tradition,” he describes two “policy positions” that we can see in American thought from the Reconstruction era to contemporary American politics. One position, “stretching from Frederick Douglass to Booker T. Washington to our contemporaries Shelby Steele and Thomas Sowell, emphasizes liberal individualism based on initiative in the private sphere, self-development, work and thrift, the rationality of economic life, personal responsibility, and integration with the larger white society.” The other position, “which stretches from W. E. B. DuBois to Martin Luther King Jr. to our contemporaries Henry Louis Gates and Cornel West” emphasizes such things as “race as a collective experience, power as residing in groups rather than individuals,” and “the necessity of civil disobedience and non-violent coercion.” Diggins brings this reading into a contemporary ideological context by contending that Douglass’s individualism is an alternative to the “mystique of difference” celebrated by the political left: “At a time when many Americans are told that their identity lies in being recognized as some kind of ethnic subspecies, it may be helpful to remember that Lincoln and Douglass could share a national identity and a common historical foundation in American liberalism.” These claims leave little doubt that Diggins situates Douglass’s legacy on the right wing of contemporary political discourse.
In *Creative Conflict in African American Thought*, Wilson Jeremiah Moses contends that Douglass accepted “Free the slaves and leave them alone” as his “motto” after the failure of Reconstruction convinced him of “the unreliability of government as defender of political rights.” After the Civil War, Moses argues, Douglass “settled into a doctrine of laissez faire, in which greed was to be regulated only by the invisible hand of moral sentiments.” Moses concludes that Douglass is best described as a “laissez faire liberal.” It is worth noting that unlike Diggins, Moses does not celebrate this interpretation of Douglass. In other words, while it is clear that Diggins prefers the classical liberalism he finds in Douglass to the “mystique of difference” offered by contemporary progressive liberals, Moses finds Douglass’s laissez faire liberalism to be deeply problematic.

Some scholars who embrace the classical liberal reading of Douglass are more ambivalent. Intellectual historian Waldo E. Martin, for example, identifies both laissez faire and humanitarian elements in Douglass’s political thought. Similarly, political theorist Gayle McKeen emphasizes the centrality of self-help in Douglass’s thought, but contends that his philosophy does not fit neatly into either the classical or reform categories. The most sustained treatment of Douglass as a political thinker is Peter C. Myers’s recent book, *Frederick Douglass: Race and the Rebirth of American Liberalism*. Myers contends that Douglass is “unequaled in his articulation of the first principles of natural rights liberalism in their application to racial justice in America.” Although Myers’s account is nuanced and complex, the crux of his argument is that Douglass is best understood as an advocate of natural rights and that his argument “lives on” in the writings of black conservatives like Thomas Sowell, Shelby Steele, and John McWhorter and in what might reasonably be called the “conservative” writings of black writers situated on the contemporary left such as Juan Williams and Orlando Patterson. It would be unfair to conclude that Myers’s interpretation fits neatly on the classical liberal side of the divide I am describing here. Myers calls Douglass a Hamiltonian nationalist who embraces an active federal government and he is careful not to overstate the connection between Douglass’s ideas and the ideas of contemporary black conservatives. Rather than saying that Douglass clearly fits into the contemporary conservative camp, Myers contends that he shares the contemporary black conservative rejection of the “culture of alienation” that he believes pervades the thinking of several other black thinkers.

As you will see in the chapters that follow, I believe those who interpret Douglass as a classical liberal capture part of the truth about his politi-
cal philosophy. He was indeed an ardent defender of self-ownership, self-reliance, and several other lodestars of the classical liberal tradition. But a pure libertarian he was not. As an alternative set of interpreters has made clear, Douglass was a thinker who was acutely aware of the problem of inequality and whose remedy to this problem departed in significant ways from the core tenets of classical liberalism. Douglass, more so than most, was cognizant of the vulnerability of individuals in isolation and he appreciated the myriad ways in which human beings need one another to survive and flourish. Rather than offering a purely classical liberal politics of rights and interests, these interpreters contend, Douglass offers us a politics of fraternity and obligations. His legacy lives on not in the individualist ideas of Clarence Thomas and his ilk but in the ideas of thinkers like Martin Luther King, Jr., Thurgood Marshall, and contemporary progressives. This alternative set of interpreters sees Douglass as something other than an ardent individualist. According to these interpreters, Douglass’s project forced him to transcend the bounds of individualism to a set of ideas that emphasize the language of community and obligation. As you will see in my analysis in the chapters that follow, these interpreters capture an important part of the truth as well.

The classic expression of this view is found in Wilson Carey McWilliams’s *The Idea of Fraternity in America*, a text in which the author examines an “alternative tradition” that emphasizes interdependence and obligation that has existed alongside the classical liberal tradition’s emphasis on rights and interests in American political history. McWilliams argued that Douglass’s experience as a slave led him “close to a true recognition of human weakness and dependence” and to an understanding “that what is really to be feared in human affairs is isolation.” Douglass, McWilliams argued, was “devoted to the ideal of human fraternity” and saw that the “principal antagonists” of this ideal are “those who accept individualism and the doctrine of self-reliance, for these must necessarily be fearful of their fellows.”

Political scientist J. David Greenstone and historian Daniel Walker Howe have offered interpretations of Douglass not far from the reading offered by McWilliams. Prior to his untimely death, Greenstone had planned to write a chapter on Douglass and the abolitionist Lydia Maria Child in his classic text on American political thought, *The Lincoln Persuasion*, in which he would argue that Douglass was a reform liberal—a term Greenstone defined as a philosophy that held “individuals have an obligation . . . to cultivate and develop their physical, intellectual, aesthetic and moral faculties,” and who believe this obligation “extends to helping others.
do the same.”\textsuperscript{32} Greenstone associated the reform liberal view with a more activist state that supports increased funding for educational and cultural programs. In his book \textit{Making the American Self}, historian Daniel Walker Howe agrees with this interpretation: “Douglass’s political thought illustrates beautifully David Greenstone’s conception of reform liberalism as a philosophy dedicated to national regeneration.”\textsuperscript{33} Howe takes this interpretation a step further by recruiting Douglass into the cause of contemporary progressive politics: “Douglass can speak to the issues of today if we want him to: compensatory education, head start, measuring how far students have come instead of what point they have reached—these contemporary issues find an advocate in Frederick Douglass.”\textsuperscript{34}

In addition to this reform liberal interpretation, some scholars have taken this alternative reading even further by suggesting that Douglass is best understood as part of the civic republican tradition. Although this tradition is varied and complex, its core is described by political scientist Alan Gibson as “beliefs that virtue (defined as the voluntary subordination of self-interest to the public good) is necessary to the preservation of republics and conversely that corruption (the pursuit by citizens and rulers of private gain at public expense) must be avoided.”\textsuperscript{35} Historian Daniel McInerney has argued that Douglass and other abolitionists adopted the republican language of corruption as the core of their case against chattel slavery.\textsuperscript{36} In a similar vein, Michael Sandel identifies Douglass with the civic republican “political antislavery” strand of thought that defined freedom as empowerment (as opposed to the liberal “abolitionist” strand of William Lloyd Garrison and others who defined freedom as noninterference).\textsuperscript{37} Most recently, political theorist Robert Gooding-Williams has argued that “Douglass’s politics of reconstruction” often “appears to belong to a tradition of Roman and republican political theory.” Gooding-Williams contends that Douglass relied on a republican “narrative of decline” in the years prior to the Civil War in order to make the case that the country was in need of a virtuous rededication to the principles of the Declaration of Independence.\textsuperscript{38}

As you will see in the second half of this book, I believe the advocates of these alternative readings are on to something. McWilliams is right to point out that Douglass’s experience at the margins of the political community led him to a distinct appreciation of the perils of isolation. Greenstone is right to suggest that there are ways in which Douglass’s conception of liberty goes beyond the purely negative view of freedom as absence of interference. Howe captures something important about the spirit of Douglass’s project, which
was truly regenerative in nature. Douglass was attempting to fashion a refounding of the American republic in a way that vindicated the first principles expressed in the Declaration of Independence and purged it of beliefs and practices offensive to those principles. In the words of philosopher Derrick Darby, the “true genius of Frederick Douglass’s political philosophy” is his calling of “our attention to the blatant inconsistencies” between American ideals and practices. In the language of Gooding-Williams, Douglass’s central message to all Americans was to “reenact their fathers’ founding commitment to the principles of the Declaration” by purging the practice of slavery. Furthermore, Howe’s attempt to enlist Douglass in the contemporary progressive cause is not without merit. Douglass was acutely aware of the severe inequalities that existed around him and he envisioned an active role for government to combat those inequalities.

In sum, the scholarly literature on Douglass’s political thought leaves us with an interpretive puzzle to be solved. Before proceeding, a word must be said on why making sense of this interpretive puzzle matters. There are two interrelated reasons why this is worthwhile: one scholarly and one political. As a scholarly matter, the divergent interpretations of Douglass’s thought present us with a dispute to be resolved. A careful analysis of his words with due consideration to the contexts in which he communicated them can provide us with a better sense of what counts as a legitimate reading and what does not. Making sense of Douglass’s legacy is significant for political reasons as well. Douglass, like Abraham Lincoln and the American Founders, comes down to us as an almost mythic figure in our political history. He has become perhaps the most recognizable symbol of American abolitionism and one of our country’s earliest defenders of equal rights for all. Douglass’s symbolic significance has led to contemporary appropriations by scholars and politicians from across the ideological spectrum. These scholars and politicians sometimes argue and more often assert that Douglass’s ideas are supportive of their own positions in contemporary debates. It is not surprising, for example, that in recent political discussions Douglass’s name was invoked by prominent members of both the Republican and Democratic parties and that he has been celebrated by figures as divergent as Glenn Beck and Angela Davis. The explicit or implicit suggestion that Douglass is “on our side” in a contemporary philosophical or policy debate may carry some significance for political elites and citizens. If Douglass’s ideas are being misappropriated, it is the duty of scholars to set the record straight. My hope is that this book contributes to this task.
Plan of the Book

In the chapters that follow, I reconstruct Douglass’s political thought. As noted above, because my aim is to explain the core principles of his political philosophy, my argument proceeds thematically rather than chronologically. In the next two chapters, I demonstrate that the core of his thought was liberal. In chapter 2, I explore how Douglass drew on the experience of slavery to defend the classical liberal idea of self-ownership. A political community is only just, he argued, if each individual’s right to control his or her own life is respected. In chapter 3, I draw out the political consequences of this belief in self-ownership by describing Douglass’s commitments to individual rights, toleration, and limited, representative government and by demonstrating that he rejected anarchist, socialist, perfectionist, and radical democratic alternatives to liberalism. My aim in chapter 3 is to establish that the basic framework of Douglass’s politics is liberal.

After establishing Douglass’s liberal credentials, I move in a slightly different direction. As a progressive reformer, Douglass had to confront the fact that most of his contemporaries accepted the liberal ideas that made up the core of his thought while being simultaneously committed to ideologies of exclusion such as sexism, racism, and xenophobia. American liberalism was, in short, incomplete. In order to close the gap between the promises of liberalism and the realities of American life, Douglass infused his political philosophy with an egalitarian ethos of inclusion and a robust conception of mutual responsibility. He had to convince his listeners that all human beings—regardless of race, sex, or origin—ought to be included in the promises of liberalism, and he had to convince his listeners that they should feel obliged to take the steps necessary to make this happen. I will show that Douglass believed each individual has an obligation to stand up for the rights of others when they are being violated or are under threat, to treat others fairly, and to stand up against unfair institutions and practices. Furthermore, he believed that citizens and statesmen have obligations to cultivate a “moral ecology” that will encourage individuals to make responsible choices.

In chapter 4, I show how Douglass’s experience as an abolitionist led him to articulate this philosophy of mutual responsibility and I examine the sorts of arguments he offered in defense of the claim that free men have obligations to liberate slaves. From this discussion of the mutual obligation in Douglass’s thought, I proceed to a discussion of the consequences of these ideas for the behavior of individuals and institutions. In chapter 5, I examine two ideal types central to Douglass’s political philosophy—the Reformer and
the Self-Made Man—in order to capture a sense of how he believed individuals ought to behave in order to achieve and maintain a just political community. The Reformer directs individuals to feel a strong sense of responsibility for the realization of justice and fairness in the basic structure of the political community, and the Self-Made Man directs individuals to work hard and behave virtuously in order to achieve personal, familial, and neighborhood well-being. In chapter 6, I examine Douglass’s understanding of the proper role of the state in educating its citizens in a way that is supportive of freedom and virtue. I contend that through coercion, law-making, rhetoric, and the establishment of educational institutions the state can promote what Douglass called a “humanitarian culture.”

In chapter 7, I conclude by offering some reflections on debates over Douglass’s legacy. I contend that most interpreters have oversimplified Douglass’s views and that all attempts to draw contemporary conclusions from his nineteenth-century arguments should be chastened by a heavy dose of humility. With this in mind, I contend that while it is hard to know what conclusions Douglass would come to in the philosophical and policy debates of today we can say something about how the spirit of his thought might shape the lens through which we view contemporary political questions. Fundamentally, he directs us to think about the ways in which the liberal goal of securing the conditions necessary for the exercise of personal freedom depends upon the prevalence of a robust sense of mutual responsibility.