

Philosophy Born of Struggle

Anthology of
Afro-American Philosophy
from 1917

Edited with an Introduction and Select Bibliography
of Afro-American Works in Philosophy by

Leonard Harris



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Robert C. Williams. "W. E. B. DuBois: Afro-American Philosopher of Social Reality." *Bicentennial Symposium on Philosophy*, New York: City University of New York Graduate Center, 1976, pp. 99-107. Reprinted by permission of the author.

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Thomas F. Slaughter. "Epidermalizing the World: A Basic Mode of Being Black." *Man & World* 10 (1977), pp. 303-308. Reprinted by permission of the author.

Figure Design

Figure designed for this anthology by Edward L. Pryce, Tuskegee Institute, Alabama. According to the artist, "The central figure is the spirit of man with his roots in various cultures over time and struggling to understanding and joy."

Photographs

Frederick Douglass, courtesy of the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

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Unfinished Lecture on Liberation—II

Angela Y. Davis

One of the striking paradoxes of the bourgeois ideological tradition resides in an enduring philosophical emphasis on the idea of freedom alongside an equally pervasive failure to acknowledge the denial of freedom to entire categories of real, social human beings. In ancient Greece, whose legacy of democracy inspired some of the great bourgeois thinkers, citizenship in the *polis*, the real exercise of freedom, was not accessible to the majority of people. Women were not allowed to be citizens and slavery was an uncontested institution. While the lofty notions affirming human liberty were being formulated by those who penned the United States Constitution, Afro-Americans lived and labored in chains. Not even the term 'slavery' was allowed to mar the sublime concepts articulated in the Constitution, which euphemistically refers to "persons held to service or labor" as those exceptional human beings who did not merit the rights and guarantees otherwise extended to all.

Are human beings free or are they not? Ought they be free or ought they not be free? The history of Afro-American literature furnishes an illuminating account of the nature of freedom, its extent and limits. Moreover, we should discover in Black literature an important perspective that is missing in so many of the discourses on the theme of freedom in the history of bourgeois philosophy. Afro-American literature incorporates the consciousness of a people who have been continually denied entrance into the real world of freedom, a people whose struggles and aspirations have exposed the inadequacies not only of the practice of freedom, but also of its very theoretical formulation.

The central issue in this article (based on the course entitled "Recurring Philosophical Themes in Black Literature") will be the idea of freedom. Commencing with the *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, we will explore the slave's experience of bondage as the basis for a transformation of the principle of freedom into a dynamic, active struggle for liberation. We will then examine the ideas of the great twentieth century Afro-American thinker, W. E. B. DuBois, and will proceed to trace Black ideological development in literature up to the contemporary era. In conclusion, we will compare the writings of a few representative African and Caribbean writers to the works of Afro-Americans. In each instance, the notion of freedom will be the axis around which we will attempt to develop other philosophical concepts such as the meaning of knowledge, the function of morality, and the perception of history peculiar to an oppressed people striving toward the goal of collective liberation.

Before actually approaching the material, we should familiarize ourselves with some of the questions we will pose as we explore the nature of human freedom. First of all, is freedom an essentially subjective experience?; is it

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essentially objective?; or is it rather a synthesis of both these poles? In other words, should freedom be conceived as an inherent characteristic of the human mind, whose expression is primarily inward? Or is it a goal to be realized through human action in the real, objective world? Freedom of thought? Freedom of action? Freedom as practical realization? Freedom of the individual? Freedom of the collective? Consider, for instance, this aspect of the philosophy of freedom proposed by the French Existentialist, Jean-Paul Sartre. Because it is in the nature of the human being to be 'condemned to freedom,' even those who are held in chains remain essentially free, for they are always at liberty to eliminate their condition of slavery, if only because death is an alternative to captivity. Considering the African's real experience of slavery on this continent, would you attempt to argue that the Black slave was essentially free since even in bondage, a person retains the freedom to choose between captivity and death? Or rather would you detect a basic incompatibility between this notion and the real prerequisites of liberation? Would you agree, in other words, that when the slave opts for death, the resulting elimination of the predicament of slavery also abolishes the fundamental condition of freedom, i.e., the slave's experience of living, human reality. Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey met with death at the conclusion of the slave revolts they so courageously led, but was it death they chose or was it liberation for their people even at the risk of death for themselves as individuals?

The slave who grasps the real significance of freedom understands that it does not ultimately entail the ability to choose death over life as a slave, but rather the ability to strive toward the abolition of the master-slave relationship itself.

The first part of the *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, which is entitled "Life of a Slave," traces both a material and philosophical journey from slavery to freedom. The point of departure is occasioned by the following question posed by Frederick Douglass the child: "Why am I a slave? Why are some people slaves and others masters?" Douglass, of course, has rejected the usual religious explanations based on the belief that God's will was responsible for Black people being condemned to lives of bondage and for the slave-masters being bearers of white skin. As the question itself implies, Douglass has also challenged the credibility of all other apologetic theories regarding slavery in the history of Western ideas.

The slave is a human being whom another has absolutely denied the right to express his or her freedom. But is not freedom a property that belongs to the very essence of the human being? Either the slave is not a human being or else the very existence of the slave is itself a contradiction. Of course, the prevailing racist ideology, which defined people of African descent as sub-human, was simply a distortion within the realm of ideas based on real and systematic efforts to deny Black people their rightful status as human beings. In order to perpetuate the institution of slavery, Africans were forcibly compelled to live and labor under conditions hardly fit for animals. The slaveholder class was determined to fashion Black people in the image of those

subhumans described in the ideology justifying the oppression meted out to slaves. In this sense, it was the slave-holder whose consciousness was a slave to the socio-economic system that relegated to him the role of oppressor. The master's notion of freedom, in fact, involved this capacity to control the lives of others—the master felt himself free at the expense of the freedom of another. As the conscious slave certainly realized, this merely abstract freedom to suppress the lives of others rendered the master a slave of his own misconceptions, his own misdeeds, his own brutality and infliction of oppression.

If the slave-holder was entrapped within a vicious circle, there was a potential exit gate for the slave: the slave could opt for active resistance. These are the reflections Frederick Douglass offers on his childhood experience of observing a slave resist a flogging: "That slave who had the courage to stand up for himself against the overseer, although he might have many hard stripes at first, became while legally a slave virtually a free man. 'You can shoot me,' said a slave to Rigby Hopkins, 'but you can't whip me,' and the result was he was neither whipped nor shot." In this posture of resistance, the rudiments of freedom were already present. The stance of self-defense signified far more than a simple refusal to submit to a flogging, for it was also an implicit rejection of the entire institution of slavery, its standards, its morality. It was a microcosmic effort toward liberation.

The slave could thus become conscious of the fact that freedom is not a static quality, a given, but rather is the goal of an active process, something to be fought for, something to be gained in and through the process of struggle. The slave-master, on the other hand, experienced what he defined as his freedom as an inalienable fact: he could hardly become aware that he, too, had been enslaved by the system over which he appeared to rule.

To return to a question we posed earlier—is it possible for a human being to be free within the limits of slavery—we can argue that the path toward freedom can only be envisioned by the slave when the chains, the lash, and the whipping post of slavery are actively challenged. The first phase of liberation must thus involve a rejection of the material conditions and ideological images contrived in the interests of the slave-holder class. The slave must reject his/her existence as a slave. In the words of Frederick Douglass, "(n)ature never intended that men and women should be either slaves or slaveholders, and nothing but rigid training long persisted in, can perfect the character of the one or the other." Slavery is an alienation from the human condition, a violation of humanity that distorts both parties, but that fundamentally alienates the slave from the freedom to which every human being ought to have a right. This alienation can remain unacknowledged and unchallenged, or it can be recognized in such a way as to provide a theoretical impetus for a practical thrust in the direction of freedom.

The most extreme form of human alienation is the reduction of a productive and thinking human being to the status of property: "Personality swallowed up in the sordid idea of property! Manhood lost in chattelhood! . . . Our destiny was to be *fixed for life*, and we had no more voice in the decision

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of the question than the oxen and cows that stood chewing at the haymow.” “The slave was a fixture,” Frederick Douglass compellingly argued. “He had no choice, no goal, but was pegged down to one single spot, and must take root there or nowhere.” The slave exercised no control whatsoever over the external circumstances of his/her life. On one day, a woman might be living and working among her children, their father, her relatives, and friends. The very next day she might be headed for a destination miles and miles away, journey far beyond the possibility of ever again encountering those with whom she had enjoyed intimate contacts for years. For the slave, “(h)is going out into the world was like a living man going into the tomb, who, with open eyes, sees himself buried out of sight and hearing of wife, children, and friends of kindred tie.” Describing a related experience, Frederick Douglass presents a moving account of his grandmother’s last days. Having faithfully served her master from his birth to his death, having borne children and grandchildren for him, she is disdainfully dismissed by her original master’s grandson. This old woman is banished from the plantation and sent into the woods to die a horrible solitary death.

Although unwittingly, Frederick Douglass’ owner reveals a way for the young boy to become cognizant of his alienation as a slave. “If you give a nigger an inch he will take an ell. Learning will spoil the best nigger in the world. If he learns to read the Bible it will forever unfit him to be a slave. He should know nothing but the will of his master and learn to obey it.” In other words, as long as the slave accepts the master’s will as the absolute authority over his/her life, the alienation is absolute. With no effective will of one’s own, with no realizable desires of one’s own, the slave must seek the essence of his/her being in the will of the master. What does this mean? In an important sense, it is the slave’s consent that permits the master to perpetuate the condition of slavery—not, of course, free consent, but rather consent based on brutality and force.

Having overheard his master’s observations on the revolutionary potential of knowledge, Frederick Douglass reflects: “‘Very well,’ thought I, ‘Knowledge unfits a child to be a slave.’ I instinctively assented to the proposition, and from that moment I understood the direct pathway from slavery to freedom.” Looking closely at these words, we detect once again the theme of resistance. Douglass’ first enlightening experience regarding the possibility of a slave asserting his yearning for freedom involved resistance to a flogging. He later discovers resistance in the form of education, resistance of the mind, a refusal to accept the will of the slave-master, a determination to seek an independent means of judging the world around him.

As the slave who challenged his master to whip him and threatened to physically resist his aggressor’s violent lashes, Frederick Douglass appropriates his master’s insight—i.e., learning unfits a person to be a slave—and vows to use it against his oppressor. Resistance, rejection, physical and mental, are fundamental moments of the journey toward freedom. In the beginning, however, it is inevitable that knowledge, as a process leading to a more profound

comprehension of the meaning of slavery, results in despair. "When I was about thirteen years old, and had succeeded in learning to read, every increase of knowledge, especially anything respecting the free states, was an additional weight to the most intolerable burden of my thought—'I am a slave for life.' To my bondage I could see no end. It was a terrible reality, and I shall never be able to tell how sadly that thought chafed my young spirit."

The child's despair must give way to an emerging consciousness of his alienated existence. He begins to seek freedom as the negation of his concrete condition—in fact, it seems to be present as the negation of the very air he breathes. "Liberty, as the inestimable birthright of every man, converted every object into an asserter of this right. I heard it in every sound, and saw it in every object. It was ever present to torment me with a sense of my wretchedness, the more horrible and desolate was my condition. I saw nothing without seeing it and I heard nothing without hearing it. I do not exaggerate when I say that it looked at me in every star, smiled in every calm, breathed in every wind and moved in every storm."

Frederick Douglass has arrived at a consciousness of his predicament as a slave. That consciousness at the same time is a rejection of his predicament. But enlightenment does not result in *real* freedom, or even a mental state of pleasure. Referring to his mistress, Douglass says: "She aimed to keep me ignorant, and I resolved to *know*, although knowledge only increased my misery." Moreover, the slave has not simply rejected his individual condition and his misery does not simply result from his consciousness of his alienation as an individual. "It was *slavery* and not its mere *incidents* that I hated." True consciousness involves a rejection of the institution itself and all of the institution's accompaniments.

As he moves down the pathway from slavery to freedom, Frederick Douglass experiences religion as a reinforcement and justification of his yearning for liberation. Out of the doctrines of Christianity, he deduces the equality of all human beings before God. If this is true, he infers, then slave-masters are defying God's will and should consequently suffer God's wrath. Freedom, liberation, the abolition of slavery, the elimination of human alienation—all these visions are given a metaphysical foundation. A supernatural being wills the abolition of slavery and Frederick Douglass, slave and believer, must execute God's will by striving toward the aim of liberation. Of course, Douglass was not alone in his efforts to forge a theology of liberation on the basis of the Christian doctrine. Nat Turner's rebellion and John Brown's attack were among the innumerable anti-slavery actions directly inspired by Christianity.

Christianity, when it was offered to the masses of slaves, was originally destined to serve precisely the opposite purpose. Religion was to furnish a metaphysical justification not for freedom, but rather for the institution of slavery itself.

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One of the most widely quoted, but least understood passages in the writings of Karl Marx concerns religion as the 'opium of the people.' This is generally assumed to simply mean that the function of religion is to counsel acquiescence toward worldly oppression and to redirect hopes and yearnings of oppressed people into the supernatural realm. A little suffering during a person's lifetime in the real world is entirely insignificant in comparison to an eternity of bliss. But what is the larger context of Marx's assertion, which is contained in the opening paragraphs of his *Introduction to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*? "Religious suffering is at the same time an *expression* of real suffering and a *protest* against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people. The abolition of religion as the *illusory* happiness of men, is a demand for their *real* happiness. The call to abandon their illusions about their condition is a *call to abandon a condition which requires illusions.*" In other words, it is true indeed that real wants, real needs, and real desires can be transformed into impotent wish-dreams via the process of religion, especially if things appear to be utterly hopeless in this world. But it is also true that these dreams can revert to their original state—as real wishes, real needs to change the existing social reality. It is possible to redirect these wish-dreams to the here and now. Frederick Douglass attempted to redirect aspirations that were expressed within a religious context and, like Nat Turner and countless others, placed them within the framework of the real world. Religion can play a potentially revolutionary role since—for oppressed people, at least—its very nature is to satisfy urgent needs grounded in the real, social world.

In his work, *The Peculiar Institution*, Kenneth Stampp extensively discusses the role of religion as a vehicle of appeasement for Black people, as a means of suppressing potential revolt. In the beginning, he observes, Africans were not converted to Christianity, because this might have established for the slaves a solid argument for freedom. However, the slave-holding colonies eventually began to pass legislation to the effect that Black Christians were not to become free simply by virtue of their baptism. Stampp formulates the reasons why slaves could be allowed to enter the sacred doors of Christianity: "Through religious instruction, the bondman learned that slavery had divine sanction, that insolence was as much an offense against God as against the temporal master. They received the Biblical command that servants should obey their masters and they heard of the punishments awaiting the disobedient slave in the hereafter. They heard, too, that eternal salvation would be their reward for faithful service and that on the day of judgment God would deal impartially with the poor and the rich, the black man and the white."

Thus those passages in the Bible emphasizing obedience, humility, pacifism, patience, were presented to the slave as the essence of Christianity. On the other hand, those passages that emphasized equality, freedom, and happiness as attributes of this world as well as the next—those that Frederick

Douglass discovered after teaching himself the illegal activity of reading—were eliminated from the official sermons destined to be heard by slaves. Thus a censored version of Christianity was developed especially for the slaves and one who emulated the slave-master's piety would never strike a white man and would believe that his master was always right even though the oppressor might violate all human standards of morality. Yet there is no lack of evidence that new criteria for religious piety were developed within the slave community: the militant posture of a Frederick Douglass, a Harriet Tubman, a Gabriel Prosser, and a Nat Turner, and the fact that the Christian spirituals created and sung by the masses of slaves were also powerful songs of freedom demonstrate the extent to which Christianity could be rescued from the ideological context forged by the slaveholders and imbued with a revolutionary content of liberation.

Frederick Douglass' response to Nat Turner's revolt is revealing: "The insurrection of Nat Turner had been quelled, but the alarm and terror which it occasioned had not subsided. The cholera was then on its way to this country, and I remember thinking that God was angry with the white people because of their slaveholding wickedness, and therefore his judgments were abroad in the land. Of course it was impossible for me not to hope much for the abolition movement when I saw it supported by the Almighty, and armed with death."

Note on the Author

This article is based on the initial lecture given by Angela Y. Davis in her first course, "Recurring Philosophical Themes in Black Literature", Fall 1969, at the University of Los Angeles, Department of Philosophy. The lecture was printed and distributed by the Angela Y. Davis Defense Committee under the title "Unfinished Lectures on Liberation", and subsequently distributed by the Department of Philosophy, Morgan State University. This article is a revision of that initial plunge into the doing of philosophy and forms the second installment in an on-going analysis. A. Y. Davis teaches philosophy at San Francisco State University, Ethnic Studies Department and recently authored *Women, Race & Class*, 1981.