Liberty & Responsibility in the Political Thought of Frederick Douglass

Discussion Colloquium
Sponsored by the Institute for Humane Studies
228 pages

Douglass, Frederick. The Essential Douglass: Selected Writings and Speeches. Edited by Nicholas Buccola. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2016. (Available on Amazon and Barnes and Noble-- paperback, $19.00 each)

Reader Abstract: This reader moves chronologically through Frederick Douglass's life and thought process, with reference to the events taking place in the United States at the time of the given writing. The first session deals with his life as a slave, followed by his abolitionist writing, his writings on the Constitution and the antebellum political controversies, and finally, his post-emancipation political writings.

Session 1: Autobiography as Political Philosophy (31 pages)

- The Liberator

Session Abstract: The autobiographical pieces each have a different theme, beginning with the cruelty of slave masters, the importance of education in instilling the idea of freedom, and the resistance to an oppressor. The two articles from The Liberator deal with natural rights and self-ownership.

Session 2: Douglass on the Use of Force to Achieve Liberation (49 pages)

- Frederick Douglass’ Paper
  - October 23, 1851, “Is Civil Government Right?” pages 45-49.
  - June 2, 1854, “Is it Right and Wise to Kill a Kidnapper?” pages 76-89.
- The Liberator
- Douglass’ Monthly
Session Abstract: In these selections, Douglass reflects on the question of when it might be justified to use force in order to vindicate natural rights. In the first selection, Douglass responds to anarchists who object to all use of force. In the second and third selections, Douglass reflects on the question of whether or not abolitionists might be justified in using violence against those attempting to enforce the fugitive slave law. In the next two selections, Douglass reveals his growing sense that slavery will not be ended without violence and in the final piece, he offers a full-throated defense of the violent abolitionist John Brown.

Session 3: Douglass on Patriotism, the Constitution, and the American Founding (59 pages)

- Frederick Douglass’ Paper
- “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July? (1852) Pages 50-71

Session Abstract: In these pieces, we get a sense of Douglass’s evolving views of the Constitution and the American Founding. More specifically, we see how he went from the Garrisonian view that the Constitution was irredeemably proslavery to the view that the Constitution – when read in the light of the Declaration and the Preamble – could be read as an antislavery document. In the last three selections, we see Douglass apply this antislavery reading to various controversies throughout the 1850s.

Session 4: Frederick Douglass on the Good Life (34 pages)

- “It Moves, or the Philosophy of Reform (1883),” pages 286-300.

Session Abstract: This final session focuses on three lectures Douglass delivered late in his life in which he reflects on how one ought to live. More specifically, the pieces invite us to think about our obligations to promote justice in our communities, “make” ourselves, and to develop as intellectual and moral beings. Taken together, the pieces give us a glimpse of Douglass’s sense of a life well-lived.