

# Unjustified suffering and christianity in the life of frederick douglass



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## 1. Introduction

*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* is an autobiography written by Frederick Douglass, an escaped slave, abolitionist, preacher, and revered leader of the African American community. In this work, Douglass gives an unembellished account of his life under slavery. He addresses not only the horrific physical abuse of slavery but touches upon the moral and spiritual decay that slavery brings to slaveholders. In his time, he was described by abolitionists as a living counter-example to slaveholders' arguments that slaves lacked the intellectual capacity to function as independent American citizen. In his memoir, "*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*", he discusses the role of religion, Christianity in particular, in strengthening the foundation of slavery. This essay is going to examine the impact of religious literature on the development of slavery through the lens of Douglass' memoir. Additionally, this essay will explore the mutually exclusive existence of unjustified suffering, as portrayed by Douglass, and the benevolent Christian God.

## 2. Analysis

Through the course of the memoir, the reader is led to believe that true Christianity and slavery are diametrically opposing forces that cannot exist in perfect harmony. Moreover, it appears that even true Christianity can get corrupted with the introduction of slavery into a community. This is a recurring theme throughout the work, with Douglass contrasting both forms of Christianity to reveal the underlying hypocrisy of the slaveholding South as well as the potential redemptive value of his version of true Christianity. It is important to first outline Douglass' own views on Christianity, aside from <https://assignbuster.com/unjustified-suffering-and-christianity-in-the-life-of-frederick-douglass/>

the delineation provided at the end of the work.[1]Despite his repeated criticisms about how the religion has been sabotaged and misused as an apparatus of power within the structure of slavery, Douglass can be classified as a firm believer. It is clear from the first half of the work that Douglass has a clear grasp over religious literature due to his repeated application of moral stories to his personal life. For instance, Douglass thinks about slavery in the context of biblical and Christian thought when he discusses the children who have been born to white slave owners. He says, “if their increase will do no other good, it will do away with the force of the argument that slavery is justified because God cursed Ham with dark colored skin” (24). If only the lineal descendants of Ham are to be scripturally enslaved, eventually slavery will become unscriptural.

From Douglass’ portrayal of slavery throughout the work, it seems that the shift from true to false religion, or the Christian to the non-Christian, happens as a direct result of slavery. He seemingly argues that slavery’s very prevalence in society causes slave owning whites to turn from the “true” Christianity espoused by Douglass. This is best reflected in the characterization of Mrs. Sophia Auld once she is habituated with being a slaveowner. Initially, Douglass is amazed at Mrs. Auld’s sensitivity and generosity towards the slaves. It must be pointed out here that Douglass describes her as the perfect model of a Christian woman whose “face was made of heavenly smiles” (14). However, as time passes, she undergoes a transformation of biblical purposes, figuratively turning her into the Devil. As Douglass puts it, “That cheerful eye, under the influence of slavery, soon becomes red with rage” (14). Mrs. Auld serves as the personification of the

shift that takes place from true Christianity to hypocritical Christianity due to slavery. It seems as though Douglas wishes to lead the reader to equate slavery as inherently at odds with true Christian values.

The most brutal instance of the false form of Christianity that is represented in the work is brought to life by the character of Edward Covey. While Mrs. Auld may have been swayed from her true Christian form by the presence of slavery, Covey is completely immersed in the practice of slavery and is thus the most flagrant violator of the true Christian ideals that are expressed by Douglass.[2] Again, it is necessary to go back to the idea stated earlier that the very existence of slavery tends to breed anti-Christian actions and thoughts. The case of Covey points to the fact that this really is the case since he is an overseer and is thus more in the thick of slavery than some of the other characters. When talking about Covey, Douglass makes certain to point out how his version of Christianity is at stark odds with that practiced by Mr. Covey. For instance, Douglass' ideals are expressed when Douglass states, " I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land" (95). Because of this consistent contrast of the two types of Christianity represented in the autobiography, the true and pure versus the hypocritical and self-serving, Douglass is further idolized because he has been able to uphold the ideals and values white men and women were unable to with the influence of slavery.

In my opinion, the two versions of Christianity put forth by Douglass serve multiple different purposes. At the forefront, Douglass goes out of his way to <https://assignbuster.com/unjustified-suffering-and-christianity-in-the-life-of-frederick-douglass/>

define his own sense of Christian righteousness and morality and to place himself within it somehow. In other words, Douglass' *Narrative* can be interpreted as a call to reinforce his claim to divine authority for not only his opposition to slavery, but for his own life, against any other definitions provided to him by white society. As the thesis statement of the memoir states, religion, Christianity, and hypocrisy, the fact that Douglass chooses to end the piece on a note about religion, however, should signify that the issues discussed in this essay are of vital importance to the work.

### 3. Problem of Evil

The Problem of Evil cannot be reduced to a single argument, but a series of arguments that attempt to prove the non-existence of God. The problem of evil refers to the question of how to reconcile the existence of evil with an omnipotent, omniscient and loving God. If God were omnipotent, God would be able to do something about evil. If God were omniscient, God would know about all the evil. Lastly, if God were loving, then surely God would want to do something about evil. The challenged posed by this apparent conflict has come to be known as the problem of evil. Now, I would like to present a version of the argument that seeks to disprove the existence of this conception of God through the lens of Douglass' experience with unjustified suffering.

At this point I would like to define certain terms in context to this essay. When I speak of an evil, I shall mean a state of affairs that involves the suffering an innocent human being. I am not at this point asserting that there are any innocent human beings, or that there is such a thing as human

suffering. Additionally, I would like to state that evil is necessary if it is logically necessary for the realization of a greater good. For instance, when a doctor gives you a shot in order to vaccinate you against a disease, the momentary pain you suffer is an evil in our technical sense of the term. But it is clearly justified by the future good it makes possible. These definitions could be clarified further[3], but I hope they are adequate for understanding the argument that follows:

The version of the argument proceeds as follows:

1. If God exists, God is a perfectly benevolent omnipotent being;
2. A perfectly benevolent being would prevent any unnecessary natural evil if he could;
3. An omnipotent being could prevent all unnecessary natural evil;
4. Therefore, if there were a God, there would be no unnecessary natural evil;
5. But there is unnecessary natural evil;
6. Therefore, there is no God.

The argument is valid. The only question is whether we have to agree with the premise that there exists unnecessary natural evil in this world. The claim that there exists unjustified evil is really three claims in one:

1. There is genuine human suffering;
2. Some of this suffering is undeserved because the victims are innocent;
3. Some of this undeserved suffering is unnecessary because it is not redeemed by the fact that it brings about some very great and

important good that could not possibly have been realized in a better way.

At this point, let us go back to considering Douglass' experiences with slavery as documented in his memoirs. It is impossible to deny the claim that there exists genuine human suffering. Nor is it easy to deny the fact that some of this suffering is undeserved. Let us recall that some of the victims of suffering in the memoir are very small children. Some scholars argue that every human has inherited the moral taint that Adam and Eve incurred by their willful disobedience in Eden and imply that even the smallest children are morally guilty of a serious crime. But I confess that I don't understand this argument. The suggestion that I might be morally responsible for someone else's transgression simply because he is my father seems to me no more intelligible than the suggestion that I might be morally responsible for the transgression of someone who happens to share my name. The third premise is often countered with the claim that that we should not believe that our inability to think of a good reason for doing or allowing something is indicative of whether or not God has a good reason for doing or allowing something. Michael Bergman, in his essay "Skeptical Theism and Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil" reinforces this viewpoint by highlighting the fact that humans by definition are not omniscient and are wholly incapable of perceiving every possible result of an instance of pointless suffering. Bergman is correct. It is possible that an omniscient God, should he exist, would be cognizant of benefits beyond the scope of human cognizance.

Emmanuel Levinas introduces the flaw in the concept by simply arguing that there remains no way to reconcile the unjustified suffering of slaves with the existence of a benevolent, omnipotent God. The most significant argument that may be levied against Bergman and the rest of skeptical theism is known as the Pandora's Box objection, named after the renowned artifact. For a more elaborate understanding of this see Bergman "Skeptical Theism and The Problem of Evil". in Greek mythology. Skeptical theism states that we cannot claim that God has no reason to do something simply because we cannot discern the reason. However, if that premise of skeptical theism holds true, then for all we know, God has a reason to lie to us and deceive us in every aspect of our life. If the skeptical theist is correct in his belief, we can no longer trust anything that God may be saying or may seem to reveal. For instance, let us suppose that God says that all those who commit no sin will be rewarded in 'heaven'. If the skeptical theist is to be believed, then for all we know, God has a reason to lie to us about even that. Additionally, the moment we accept skeptical theism, we can no longer reasonably trust our instincts and our beliefs because God may have a reason to deceive us about everything happening around us. For all we know, God has reason to deceive every step of the way in every way possible.

The existence of slavery as portrayed by Frederick Douglass in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, creates two key problems with the conception of the God in Christianity. According to Douglass' recollection exemplified in his memoir, there were two types of Christianity practiced during slavery. Slavery was justified by the false notion of white supremacy, which in part was dictated by different interpretations of religious literature. Additionally,

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despite his continued belief in Christianity, his experience with unjustified suffering is at direct odds with the image of an omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent God. As Douglass asks, “ Does a righteous God govern the universe? And for what does he hold the thunders in his right hand, if not to smite the oppressor and deliver the spoiled out of the hand of the spoiler?”

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[1]See Appendix

[2]Mr. Covey is described as the “ slave-breaker” in the memoir.

[3]See the Cambridge Companion to the Problem of Evil