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When reflecting upon the events leading up to the abolition of slavery, the civil rights movement of the later 20th century and other such cultural milestones of equality in America, most of these events and turning points can be traced back to key figures in American history who stood their ground against adversity and overcame tremendous hardship, not just for their own survival, but for the sake of future generations to come. In terms of race relations in the 19th century, in this particular case, concerning the interaction between African Americans white Europeans in the U. S., one name that immediately comes to mind for most people is Frederick Douglass (1818 - 1895). Frederick Douglass, having been born into slavery and became a self-freed man, was a civil rights leader ahead of his time. Not long after gaining his freedom and changing his name (from “ Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey” to “ Frederick Douglass”) (Douglass, pg. 96 - 97), Douglass became an abolitionist and outspoken opponent of slavery altogether. Unlike white abolitionists in the northern states at the time, Douglass had the advantage of being an educated, literate black man and a former slave, which gave him a frame of reference through personal experience from which to draw his arguments against the institution of slavery. His speeches on the subject are legendary, and he is often quoted by advocates of social equality to this very day. While the context of his arguments may not match current social struggles in every way, his words can be applied to the modern United States just as well as they were in the 19th century, as they can be used to defend the rights of all who are threatened by bigotry and oppression. In analyzing the nature of statements

he made in his autobiography, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (Douglass, 1845), one can see how he attacks the very idea of keeping slaves through five lenses; in understanding ignorance, religion, the perversity of slavery, friendship, and social justice, one can understand the extent to which slavery holds no weight and therefore cannot be logically justified. In fact, the only purpose it appears to serve is the satisfaction of greed alone.

For example, Douglass is quick to point out, numerous times, that ignorance is the only support structure for slavery. A slave owner can make a killing off a cotton plantation and observe how much time and money he can save by not only having access to free labor, but owning the very workers he feels no need to pay. Giving this economic advantage up would mean losing not only his wealth, but his very livelihood (or so he would think). When a person puts themselves in this perceived position of power, they will subconsciously do anything they can to justify their methods, using the U. S. Constitution, religion, and even manipulated “ science” as sources of such justification. Even if all evidence points to the contrary (e. g., hearing of an educated, intellectual, free black man) a white slave owner might still insist that blacks are an intellectually inferior subspecies and therefore do not count amongst “ men” who are “ created equal” and therefore should not be granted the same rights as whites under the constitution. As Frederick Douglass points out, such beliefs rely on ignorance and denial to justify their claims; “ the cunning slaveholder, knowing [the slave’s] ignorance, cheats him with a dose of vicious dissipation, artfully labeled with the name of liberty” (Douglass, pg. 65). The fact that slaves were denied access to knowledge is

a strong indicator of mistreatment and abuse; slaves were forbidden from learning to read or write, and from receiving any kind of education that could teach them anything about the world beyond the plantations in which they lived. Also, without strong writing or oratory skills, it would make organized rebellion and potential escape plans that much more difficult. At one point, Douglass, mentions how emotionally painful it was to be slave once he became literate, saying that once he became aware of an outside world of understanding, he was not at all content with the role he had been given and understood that slavery is something that was done to people, rather than the natural order of the world. He even goes as far as to say that he envied his ill-informed fellow slaves, that in a way it would be easier to suffer without knowledge of how far this injustice goes, but once he obtained knowledge of the outside world, he didn't just desire escape, he needed to escape in order to achieve happiness and right this great wrong, that literacy had given him " a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out. In moments of agony, I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity" (Douglass, pg. 35). What good can possibly come from an industry that relies so heavily on denial and misinformation? And what is it that active participants in slavery were trying to hide from by living in such denial? This kind of widespread ignorance is usually indicative of something wildly unethical in the guilty party's behavior and should always be a red flag in the back of one's mind.

Through the lens of religion, we can see another angle Douglass uses to attack slavery. He mentions numerous times that many slave owners used the Christian Bible as the basis of their decisions to " discipline" their slaves,

interpreting the messages of biblical scriptures and telling good old fashioned lies to solidify the slave's roles in society and to discourage slaves from doing fulfilling any other purpose than the one their master assigns to them. However, referring back to Douglass's experience upon attaining literacy, Douglass was able to read the bible himself and gain a more accurate understanding of its message, and that it, in fact, contradicts the very notion of slavery as the new testament represented a kind of reformation of the rules of the ancient world presented in the old testament. Douglass saw messages of unconditional love, mutual respect, fairness, and peace; things which did not coincide with the key characteristics of slavery. From a moral and spiritual standpoint, Douglass argues that, since slavery requires acts of cruelty and brutality in order to be maintained, the very practice of it takes a psychological toll on both the slave and the slave owner. Engaging in such acts of brutality on a regular basis brings out the worst traits in a human being; the slave owner has been taught that he is the master by the power invested in him by the state as well as god himself, meaning that horrible atrocities committed by him (the slave owner) in the name of discipline are not only fair game but morally just. This is why some slave owners, such as Edward Covey, went beyond the routine whipping as punishment and would often beat slaves seemingly out of twisted personal amusement. Engaging in this kind of behavior regularly only perpetuates it further and pretty soon, a man's vicious nature would go beyond victimizing his slaves and servants, but would sometimes extend to women and children of all colors (sometimes their own wives and children), as they are physically less capable of defending themselves and once again, white men in this

scenario are possessed by their warped sense of power. Thus, if ignorance supports the idea of slavery, and slavery perpetuates violence from which no one is exempt, then slavery creates an atmosphere of suffering for everyone involved. As Douglass says, the slave owner suffers just as much, if not more than the slave (Douglass, pg. 28). In this case, if what Douglass says is true, then it would seem illogical to maintain slave labor, even for the sake of money, as the sheer amount of suffering is disproportionate to the amount of profit to be made from slave labor. This is a prime example of how Douglass argues against the illogical and perverse behavior of slave owners in conducting this business merely in order to make money (the pursuit of which is strongly discouraged by the bible; something Douglass was sure to point out in his lifetime).

The nature of friendship is also a recurring theme throughout Douglass's autobiography. He is quick to point out the fact that slaves constantly developed close friendships and strong bonds with one another as fellow survivors in, what was for most, a life-long hardship. In fact, separation from one another was often a greater fear than death (Douglass, pg. 71). The reason why this was important is because whites often assumed that blacks lacked the ability to interact with one another on the level that other races do, believing blacks to be the most primitive of all races. But it was friendship amongst slaves that allowed fragments of their ancestral cultures to survive, even after such brutal assimilation and having been stripped of their very identity as human beings. The desire for companionship and love of family being at the core of human nature, goes to show that cruelty, regardless of whether or not it is also a staple of human nature, is an inferior,

lesser behavior that always comes into question when human beings, by nature, would rather seek friendship with one another. However, slavery disrupts this characteristic and teaches slaves and slave owners to behave in ways that deviate from this principle. If this is to be accepted, then it could be said that slavery goes against nature itself. In fact, from a psychological standpoint, this idea would point to the notion that slavery is a product of nurture (in that, it is a learned behavior). You can see evidence of the terrible nature of slavery in action through the words of Frederick Douglass speaking from first-hand experience, as he observed the horrible toll, which slavery took on Mrs. Auld as she grew to delight in the power she had over others while she would otherwise have regarded Douglass as an equal (Douglass, pg. 32).

Through the lens of social justice, we see how slavery affected women and children of all colors. It had an even harsher affect on female slaves as they were perceived as weaker still than all others; they were not only black slaves, but they were women and therefore inferior, as was the notion of the day. Douglass mentions that slave women would often receive the harshest beatings because of this. The young female slave named Henny is a prime example; she is whipped, not only daily, but several times a day by Mr. Auld, simply because he had the power to do so (Douglass, pg. 49). If a male slave owner became attracted to a female slave, it is widely known that sexual abuse or rape would often be involved, and more often than not, male slave owners would also take out their frustration on the same slave girl(s) as a way of dealing with their feelings for them. The relationship between Aunt Hester and Captain Anthony is an example of this type of relationship, as he

would outwardly deny any romantic feelings he had for her and simply resort to beatings as some sort of bizarre coping method (Douglass, pg. 5 - 6).

All of the five lenses used by Douglass to highlight the atrocities of slavery tend to overlap; the abuse of women ties in with the perversity of slavery, while both can be traced back to the concept of widespread ignorance in that people go as far as burying their good natured selves into becoming power-hungry monsters while denying evidence that what they're doing is wrong. Keeping the slaves ill-informed and uneducated is inhumane and certainly does not equate to respecting your fellow person, and doing so in the name of profit is also contradictory to the teachings of the bible, the passages of which southern slave owners were so obsessed with. Mankind's natural tendency to initially desire companionship and friendship serves as evidence of the perversity and self-harming nature of slavery. The fact that all of Frederick Douglass' arguments so brilliantly tie in with one another points to the obvious notion that he was making one central argument all along: slavery is wrong and not only should it be abolished, but there is absolutely no reason to maintain it whatsoever.

Reference:

Douglass, Frederick. Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass. New York: Dover Publications, 1995.