

## W. E. B. DU BOIS'S "CONSERVATION OF RACES"

### A METAPHILOSOPHICAL TEXT

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**Abstract:** Nothing was more important for W. E. B. Du Bois than to promote the upward mobility of African Americans. This essay revisits his "Conversation of Races" to demonstrate its general philosophical importance. Ultimately, Du Bois's three motivations for giving the address reveal his view of the nature of philosophical inquiry: to critique earlier phenotypic conceptions of race, to show the essentiality of history, and to promote a reflexive practice. Commentators have been unduly invested in the hermeneutic readings and as a result have misunderstood its philosophical dimensions. Du Bois did more than introduce the concept of race into the purview of philosophy, he provided a method for philosophical inquiry into a concept that is notoriously difficult to approach with precision. The goal here is to show why no introduction to philosophy and no discussion about the nature of philosophical inquiry is complete without consideration of "Conservation." Certainly, it is a text about race, but it is also an important philosophical text in general.

Keywords: Du Bois, race, metaphilosophy.

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### 1

At first glance, "The Conservation of Races" (hereafter "Conservation") seems simply an address that William Edward Burghardt Du Bois delivered at the inaugural meeting of the American Negro Academy, an event that took place in 1897. More than a short speech, however, it is a metaphilosophical text that announces a set of intentions illuminating the nature of philosophical inquiry. (The text was later published in the second volume of the occasional papers of the American Negro Academy.) Du Bois opens the address by explaining why the meaning of race is so important to African Americans. They have long been considered to be the inferior race. African Americans have erroneously been led to under-value racial differences, to believe that "from one blood God created all nations," and to discuss "human brotherhood" as though it has already been realized (Du Bois 2000, 108). Before Du Bois exposes the inadequacy of phenotypic conceptions of race, he promulgates his main reason

for inquiring into the meaning of race: to uplift African Americans. On the one hand, he has been attacked for expounding a conception of race that relies on circular logic and ultimately uses the same types of biological notions he ardently criticized in the work of his interlocutors. Indeed, this is how Kwame Anthony Appiah presents Du Bois in "The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race" (1985) and "The Conservation of 'Race'" (1989). On the other hand, Du Bois has been praised for making lived experience pertinent to thinking about the meaning of race. Lucius Outlaw defends Du Bois this way in "Against the Grain of Modernity: The Politics of Difference and the Conservation of 'Race'" (1992), "On W. E. B. Du Bois's 'The Conservation of Races,'" (1995), and "'Conserve' Races? In Defense of W. E. B. Du Bois" (1996a). But "Conservation" escapes facile characterizations. It calls listeners (and readers) to go beyond simple dismissals or easy commendations as it invites them to ponder the question of human alterity.

I argue that when Du Bois advances his conception of race and announces his intentions, he implicitly introduces three metaphilosophical theses that run throughout "Conservation," namely, critique as general practice is philosophy, philosophy cannot be done without attention to history, and ultimately the goal of philosophy is transformation. This is quite different from anything his interlocutors had undertaken. The search for scientific explanations of race focused on the differing appearance of human beings coupled with anxiety about miscegenation. The response from black thinkers centered on racial equality and social justice, with the tendency to minimize racial alterity. Du Bois manages to overcome both tendencies and introduce a different conception of race by revealing its real meaning, rather than how it functions. I demonstrate these metaphilosophical theses by turning to his three intentions for giving the address. They reveal a great deal about his view of the nature of philosophical inquiry: to critique earlier phenotypic conceptions of race, to show the essentiality of history, and to promote a reflexive practice. Commentators have been unduly invested in how to properly interpret minute aspects of the text and as a result have misunderstood it as a whole. Du Bois provided a method for philosophical inquiry into the concept of race that is notoriously difficult to approach with precision. My goal here is to show why no introduction to philosophy or discussion of the nature of philosophical inquiry is complete without consideration of "Conservation." Certainly, it is a text about race, but it is also an important philosophical text in general.

## 2

Like most historical figures in the Africana philosophical tradition, Du Bois has an ambivalent relationship to the discipline of philosophy. He was not formally trained in philosophy, although he studied the subject

with William James, George Santayana, and Francis Greenwood Peabody. Instead, Du Bois received a bachelor's degree in history from Harvard University after studying classics at Fisk University. Most of his work centers on the idea of race, which for a long time was not considered a proper topic of philosophical inquiry. The debate as to his status as a philosopher or nonphilosopher (that is, a historian, sociologist, or theorist) is immaterial to my argument. His direct concern with philosophy interests me. The term *philosophy* appears a total of four times in "Conservation," the most important of which states: "It is necessary, therefore, in planning our movements, in guiding our future development, that at times we rise above the pressing, but smaller questions of separate schools and cars, wage-discrimination and lynch law, to survey the whole question of race in human philosophy and to lay, on a basis of broad knowledge and careful insight, those large lines of policy and higher ideals which may form our guiding lines and boundaries in the practical difficulties of every day" (2000, 108; emphasis added). Du Bois does not deny the importance of combating racial inequality, but he reprioritizes it. He explains the necessity of first asking the metaphysical question about race and then allowing the social and the political to follow. In addition to his claim that philosophy was a German achievement, the term *philosophy* also appears to describe particular philosophies: "[the] individualistic philosophy of the Declaration of Independence and the laissez-faire philosophy of Adam Smith" (2000, 110). The philosophical movement committed to individualism is liberalism. It is not entirely apparent why Du Bois mentions Smith of all people by name. Smith's philosophy is in opposition to the unity and directionality Du Bois thinks nations need to make progress.

In 1956 Du Bois explained to Herbert Aptheker the role that studying philosophy had in his formative intellectual years: "For two years I studied under William James while he was developing Pragmatism; under [George] Santayana and his attractive mysticism and under [Josiah] Royce and his Hegelian idealism. I then found and *adopted a philosophy* which has served me since; thereafter I turned to the study of History and *what has become Sociology*" (1973, 394; emphasis added). Commentators have interpreted this passage two ways. The first is decidedly negative, reading this as Du Bois turning away from mysticism and idealism to study history and sociology (Curry 2004, 391). The second is positive, reading this as a claim that mysticism and idealism paved the way for his study of history and sociology (Shaw 2013, 3–4). For my purposes, this passage simply demonstrates that Du Bois was invested in philosophical discourses. The only thing clear about this passage is that his study of history and sociology corresponds to his study of mysticism and idealism. Before he studied history and sociology, he studied mysticism and idealism. I am not attempting to demonstrate his philosophical bona fides by showing his connection to European philosophical movements. I concur that many figures and movements of thought left an impression on Du Bois, but

there is no advantage in calling him a "Hegelian" (Williamson 1978, 21). This essay endeavors to demonstrate how "Conservation" is an independent work of metaphilosophy by relying on claims in the text.

The German influence on Du Bois greatly affected his view of philosophy. According to Du Bois, science and philosophy were the historical achievements of the German nation (2000, 112). On a personal level, his exposure to German culture, art, literature, language, and music left an enormous impression on him. Throughout his life, he continued to be a great admirer of German music and art. References to the German Romanticism of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller are frequently found in his work. On an intellectual level, he studied with the historian Heinrich von Treitschke and the political economist Gustav von Schmoller at the Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin (Beck 1996, 46). Treitschke impressed upon Du Bois the importance of national unity with his defense of Pan-Germanism, while Schmoller impressed upon him the ideas of German historiography. But the intellectual commitments of Du Bois in "Conservation" mark only a moment in a long and varied intellectual biography. No one influenced him more than the men of the American Negro Academy. Alexander Crummell, John Wesley Cromwell, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Kelly Miller were the audience for "Conservation."

It is no secret that Du Bois had a deep admiration for Crummell. He devotes an entire chapter to Crummell in *The Souls of Black Folk* (2007b [1903]) (hereafter *Souls*). But what separates Du Bois from his contemporaries in the Africana philosophical tradition is that he, unlike Frederick Douglass, does not take racial assimilation as a viable path for progress. Unlike Booker T. Washington, he does not take the accumulation of wealth as an appropriate path to freedom, and unlike Crummell, he does not take human reason and the capacity for moral agency as the basis for demonstrating that slavery is evil. He recognizes that where race is concerned, everything we thought to be true must be called into question. This methodic questioning is the vocation of a philosopher. It is not to our advantage as readers to simply place Du Bois in opposition to Douglass and Washington or refer to him as the protégé of Crummell. These men are his interlocutors. To understand the young Du Bois as a philosopher, then, we must consider the ideas of these men. He is uniquely celebrated not just for the beauty of his prose but also for the depth and breadth of his study of the plight of black people. His ideas have been marginalized in the discipline of philosophy; more often than not, they have been relegated to other disciplines, such as sociology, history, or literary studies. Today, Du Bois has achieved a coveted position in the critical philosophy of race, which should be credited to Appiah's early commentary, though Appiah initially "ushers Du Bois into the light mainly to make visible what appear to him to be blemishes" (Taylor 2000, 103). The address by Du Bois has more philosophical relevance than shown by previous interpretations,

which treat his characterization of race as a “primarily descriptive” criterion (Gray 2013, 466).

No other historical text by a black thinker has been commented on more by philosophers than “Conservation,” a fact readily established by a glance at the considerable volume of secondary literature. It is a foundational text in Africana philosophy, critical philosophy of race, and social and political philosophy. Yet, as I am insisting here, we should include it in metaphilosophy as well. There is still more to be said about the text, just as scholars of ancient Greek philosophy are still commenting on Plato’s *Apology*. It is common to think of Du Bois as one of the pioneering thinkers to contribute to our philosophical understanding of race and racism because he treats both as philosophical inquiries. But he contributes to our understanding of the nature of philosophy itself not just by helping us to see that the concept of race is within the proper scope and aim of philosophical inquiry but also by shaping our understanding of the ultimate purpose of philosophy, which is to transform the world we live in by changing the lives of people or to conceive “ideals for life” (Du Bois 2000, 111). “Conservation” has a larger impact. It calls us to reflect on the structures and processes involved in how we come to have knowledge of ourselves and the world we live in.

### 3

The address has a six-part structure: an introduction, a section discussing the phenotypic conception of race, a section establishing the sociohistorical conception of race, a section reflecting on the special predicament of African Americans, a section defending the necessity to conserve race, and a credo for the American Negro Academy. This six-part structure supports my view that Du Bois had three main intentions in the address. The first intention (to critique phenotypic conceptions of race) can be found in the introduction and the section about the scientific conception of race. The second intention (to demonstrate the essentiality of history) is apparent in nearly each part of the address but is central to the section that establishes the sociohistorical conception of race. The third motivation (to promote a reflexive practice for the improvement of African American life) of course frames the text but primarily occupies the sections on the special predicament of African Americans, defense of the necessity to conserve race, and the credo. In my analysis, the introduction of the address foreshadows the entire address with this set of intentions. The address has a tone of urgency because Du Bois is concerned about future of the Negro race, for which he feels personally responsible.

There are two overlapping senses in which Du Bois offers a critique, neither of which invokes the Kantian understanding of the term by which philosophy begins after critical reflection. Critical reflection is philosophy for Du Bois. The first sense is a critique of a position. Du Bois critiques

phenotypic conceptions of race. The sense of critique has a discourse in mind, specific opponents, and a clear objection. It has constrained goals. The second sense is critique as a general practice. Du Bois asks us to ponder the true meaning of race. It is difficult to completely separate the two senses of critique because critique is always a critique of a discourse, and even the general practice of critique is going to have a discourse in mind at some point. Critique as a general practice, however, always invokes philosophy because it is broad and invokes a methodic questioning. Within the Kantian understanding of critique, there is a sense in which critical reflection is distinct from philosophy in that it is prior to it. Thus, when Du Bois claims that it is difficult to arrive at "any definite conclusion" concerning the "the essential difference of races" (2000, 109), is he not broaching the philosophical and inviting his listeners (and readers) to remain critical of any discourse that claims to provide with confidence an answer to the question of human alterity?

#### *A Critique of Phenotypic Conceptions of Race*

The truth is that Du Bois just intends to produce a better conception of race than his interlocutors, one that accounts for the precarious experience of African Americans. He opposes the earlier phenotypic conceptions of race that propose "color, hair, cranial measurements and language" are the essential difference between human beings (Du Bois 2000, 109). He names Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, Thomas Henry Huxley, and Friedrich Ratzel as some of his opponents. (Du Bois adopts the "Raetzel" spelling. It is unclear if it was a typo or not.) There are three phenotypic conceptions of race that Du Bois opposes: natural, cultural, and ideological. Most commentators have failed to notice these subtle yet important distinctions, and as a result they have focused on what is often referred to as Du Bois's opposition to the scientific conception, following Appiah's early commentary. When Du Bois refers to science, he is referring simply to Enlightenment-era anthropological discussions rather than to the hard science of biology as we know it today (that is, the science that has dispelled the biological reality of race). In any event, Du Bois opposes Blumenbach and Huxley for their natural conceptions of race and Ratzel for his cultural conception of race. Du Bois also combats natural law conceptions of race. The geographical displacement of African Americans (a history of forced migration and enslavement) demands for Du Bois a different conception of race, one that accounts for why African Americans appear phenotypically African but, for example, have differences due to their geographical displacement. More important, he delineates what is so deeply problematic about phenotypic conceptions of race: their superficiality, outright racial chauvinism, and antiblack racism.

Du Bois opposes Blumenbach as the main proponent of the natural, phenotypic conception of race. Blumenbach plays a large role in the

invention of the scientific conception of race with the claim that humankind has natural varieties. It would have been difficult for Du Bois to ignore Blumenbach, who is a central figure in nineteenth-century discussions about the science of race (Hooker 2017, 5–11). Blumenbach repudiates Albrecht von Haller's preformationism, which introduced the notion of a formative drive (Bernasconi 2006, 75). Blumenbach expands on the work of Carl Linnaeus with his classification of human varieties in "On the Natural Variety of Mankind" (2000 [1775]). Linnaeus created the modern system of naming and classifying organisms. Blumenbach is one of the first to attempt to apply this classification approach to human beings. In his doctoral dissertation, he argues there are four human varieties, classified by geographical location: people from Europe, including North India, North Africa, and North America; people from Asia; people from Africa; and people from North America. He gradually modifies his position as more information becomes available through travel writings about other lands. In 1781 he expands the four human varieties to five but maintains geographical location as the basis for differentiation: people from Europe (primeval), including North India, North Africa, and North America (for example, Esquimaux); people from the rest of Asia beyond the Ganges River; people from Africa (except North Africa); people from the rest of America; and people from the Southern World (such as the Philippines). Accordingly, he argues that there are five human varieties classified by phenotype. Today, he is known for his five-race taxonomy: Caucasians, Mongolians, Ethiopians, Americans, and Malays. He took variations in appearance and cranial measurements and shape to be not only related to geography and climate but also indicative of racial differences. Other physical characteristics such as skin color also determine how he derives his final five human varieties. For Du Bois, the main issue with Blumenbach's "five-race schema" (2000, 109) is that it follows the logic that human alterity is purely a physical matter.

Du Bois opposes Huxley too as a proponent of the phenotypic conception of race. Huxley is one of the first to attempt to explicitly apply Charles Darwin's theory of evolution to race, despite being one of the theory's initial agnostics. After becoming an adherent of the theory, he argues in "On the Geographical Distribution of the Chief Modifications of Mankind" (1870) that there are four types of human modifications. His use of the term *modification* indicates that he adopts monogenism, applying the idea that proto-racial types become more evolved or modified and that geographical distribution is indicative of racial differences. His modifications are the Australoid type, the Negroid type, the Xanthochroic type, and the Mongoloid type (1870, 404). Huxley describes the Australoid type, or Australians, as people with a "fair stature," "well-developed torso and arms," and "dolichocephalic" (meaning their measurements were seventy-five to seventy-six on the cranial index) (404). He elaborates on the physical characteristics common to each type and its corresponding

geographical location. For example, the Negroid type generally has skin that is "various shades of brown to what is commonly called black" and belongs to "South Africa (including Madagascar) between the Sahara and what may be roughly called the region of the Cape" (404). With the dominant narrative about the origin of the human race being the "out of Africa" narrative, the Negroid type becomes the least evolved type. The tone of these proto-racial classification theories is decidedly negative, and, again, Du Bois takes issue with the idea that human alterity becomes a completely physical matter. According to Du Bois, the most important lesson we learned from Darwin is that there is more phenotypic diversity among members of the same race group than there is between the race groups themselves.

There are other opponents Du Bois has in mind. Ratzel, for one, presents a cultural, phenotypic conception of race and, like Huxley, follows Blumenbach's lead in presenting racial schema based on physical characteristics. Ratzel thus conceives of humans as organizing themselves into societies in response to their environments (Hunter 1983, 80). The greatest limitation of Darwin's natural selection thesis, for Ratzel, is that Darwin has no explanation for understanding how humans react to and utilize their surroundings. Thus, Ratzel develops his own framework. In *The History of Mankind* (1896–98), he comes to frame this discussion using the concept of *lebensraum* (living space), later used as a political term by twentieth-century German Nationalists. Ratzel refers to what he calls "cultured races" (1896–98, 1:14) and the continents they belong to. Following the same tendency to rely on geographical location as an indicator for racial identity, he derives four race groups: the American-Pacific Group of Races, Light Stocks of South and Central Africa, the Negro Races, and the Cultured Races of the Old World. These four race groups are based on geographical locations and the determining factor of culture. Ratzel then dissects these four groups into subraces. The Negro races include the Waganda and other races that formed states near the Nile, the Negroes of the upper and middle Nile, and the races of the interior of Africa. For Ratzel, the cultural development of a state is inseparable from its spatial growth. If Du Bois had invoked any understanding of culture, it would have not aligned with the one Ratzel adopts. We must be careful to distinguish their understandings of culture if we are to be persuaded by the idea that Du Bois presents "a cultural theory of race" (Jeffers 2013, 408).

Du Bois resists the idea that race can be explained with universal principles such as the ones found in natural law theory. This aspect of his critique has been completely ignored by commentators. Natural law theory might simply be called the theory of universal law. In this regard, Du Bois has no explicit concern about ethical or normative theory, with which natural law theory is generally associated. Across his works, he appeals to God, spirit, and souls. For our purposes here, the relationship between natural law and universal principles is more important than the debate as

to whether we should consider Du Bois a secular thinker or a religious naturalist (Lloyd 2016, 58–87). When we take a closer look, there are several references to natural law in “Conservation.” Historical progression is Du Bois’s universal principle, which I take up in the next section of this essay. This is Du Bois’s critique of ideological, phenotypic conceptions of race. By *ideological*, I mean that the idea of race is based on phenotype and that inferiority and superiority are attached to people based on their appearance—for example, the idea that people with dark skin are the result of the biblical curse of Ham. Du Bois intended to combat the universality of skin color etiologies in “Conservation.” Such universal laws do not neatly fit the natural or cultural phenotypic conceptions I have just described; rather, they fit the category of ideology. Ultimately, natural law theory has limitations for Du Bois because it is deterministic. Due to human ability to strive and overcome hardship, race and destiny are not static but transcendental.

### *The Essentiality of History*

Du Bois presents a philosophy of history with his race concept by making it central to the meaning and directionality of history—“one far off Divine event” (2000, 111). He regards history as an intelligible process moving toward human freedom. Even more, he views the state of human freedom as one of racial equality. History, for Du Bois, is a concept that requires a critical approach. We might call it a critique of the concept of history. The term *history* appears approximately twenty times in “Conservation.” On occasion Du Bois even capitalizes the term. Its importance is undeniable. For many commentators, the most important acknowledgement of history by Du Bois appears in his definition of race: “If this be true, then *the history of the world is the history, not of individuals, but of groups, not of nations, but of races*, and he who ignores or seeks to override the race idea in human history ignores and overrides the central thought of all history. What, then, is a race? It is a vast family of human beings, generally of common blood and language, *always of common history*, traditions and impulses, who are both voluntarily and involuntarily striving together for the accomplishment of certain more or less vividly conceived ideals of life” (2000, 110; emphasis added). I think, however, we must look at the broader significance of history in the address. Du Bois presents a philosophy of history as he is concerned with the theoretical foundation of the practice and social consequences of race. The historical context of the address is very important (Bernasconi 2009, 519). Du Bois utilizes universal understanding of world history. He indicates his agreement with the idea that there is a coherent and unified view of history that will tell a progressive story about humankind. Human progress has slowly but surely distinguished people. National identity and, therefore, racial groups contribute to history through their striving.

Du Bois claims that there are eight major races: "the Slavs of eastern Europe, the Teutons of middle Europe, the English of Great Britain and America, the Romance nations of Southern and Western Europe, the Negroes of Africa and America, the Semitic people of Western Asia and Northern Africa, the Hindoos of Central Asia and the Mongolians of Eastern Asia" (2000, 110). He also mentions that there are smaller groups within the races, thereby denying racial homogeneity. For example, the Slavs of Eastern Europe include "the Czech, the Magyar, the Pole and the Russian" (110). Du Bois does not always present the same list of world races; he presents at least three different accounts. The first, which I have just outlined, is in this address. The second appears in *Souls*: "After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son" (2007b, 8). Here Du Bois's language is almost identical to the language of the world races G. W. F. Hegel uses in his philosophy of world history, since he treats the Egyptians independently from the Negro race (Pope 2006, 183). The third appears in *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (2007a [1963]) (hereafter *Dusk*). There Du Bois emphasizes the sacredness of Africa, indicating the importance of geography, but his terminology changes, especially in the case of the Asiatic races. For instance, he names the Chinese and Indians as separate races (2007a, 49–50). This is not mere inconsistency on his part, since he never took the world races to be static. In describing what distinguishes these races from each other, he admits that phenotypic differences are relevant but superficial. The deeper differences between races concern their common histories, common laws, religion, habits, and common striving toward a goal or ideal. Historical progress brings about racial distinctions. In other words, race is a becoming.

By emphasizing the importance of history, I do not mean to undermine the sociological aspect of Du Bois's sociohistorical conception of race, which is essential for understanding the definition Du Bois puts forth and is indispensable for understanding why he decides to conduct empirical research on African Americans. I merely emphasize that the historical aspect of his conception of race is foundational to grasping what race is, or its essence is, whereas the sociological aspects concern *how* it functions in society. Du Bois analyzes social factors to demonstrate how race manifests. The two are intertwined, yet his interest in the notion of universal world history indicates more than a mere interest in the philosophy of history; instead it represents a robust historicism that guides his conception of race (Appiah 2014, 120). Historicism is the view that phenomena are determined by history and that historical development structures all human experience. The sociological aspect of Du Bois's conception of race is covered briefly in "Conservation" and even more briefly in *Souls*; it is his works such as *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (2014b [1899]) and *Black Reconstruction in America* (2014a [1935]) that explicitly cover the sociological aspect of race.

Du Bois supports the idea that race is a becoming, with his notion of double consciousness. He demonstrates to us why asking the question about human essence for African Americans is unavoidable due to experience. Each African American confronts the perils of being both American and a Negro. He then asks a series of questions that foreshadow his notion of double consciousness: "What, after all, am I? Am I an American or am I a Negro? Can I be both? Or is it my duty to cease to be a Negro as soon as possible and be an American? If I strive as a Negro, am I not perpetuating the very cleft that threatens and separates Black and White America? Is it not my only possible *practical aim* the subduction of all that is Negro in me to the American? Does my black blood place upon me anymore obligation to assert my nationality than German, or Irish or Italian blood would?" (2000, 113; emphasis added). Du Bois does not answer these questions. In a manner philosophers commonly refer to as the Socratic method, he asks these questions to stimulate critical thinking and to draw out ideas and underlying presuppositions about the meaning of race. His series of questions represent an existential crisis, self-questioning, and a deep hesitation (Gordon 2000a, 62–95). Du Bois manages to describe a life decorated with vacillation and contradiction. If one is to have a understanding of the real meaning of race, then one must consider the role of experience.

Du Bois's notion of double consciousness refers to three different, but not independent, issues. The first is about the power of stereotypes about black people, especially their capacities. The second is about the racism that first divided whites and blacks but also excluded African Americans from mainstream American society and limited their ability to participate in the national culture. This division has several iterations, but the most obvious examples are housing and educational segregation and, of course, Jim Crow laws. The third issue might simply be called the psychological issue. The double experience of being both American and not American is what Du Bois refers to as an internal conflict: the African American individual struggles between the poles of what is *African* and what is *American*. For Du Bois, the essence of a distinctive African consciousness is its spirituality, a spirituality based, geographically speaking, in Africa but revealed among African Americans in their folklore, which captures the history of their suffering, forced migration, and faith. In this sense, double consciousness concerns Du Bois's efforts to privilege the spirit over material. The notion of double consciousness precedes Du Bois: a notable example is Goethe's use of the idea in *Faust*, but Du Bois makes distinctive use of it with his conception of race. Double consciousness is an existential explanation of the affliction that the African American endures.

While his notion of double consciousness does much of the work for him in capturing relativism, Du Bois refines his conception of race by explaining it in terms of his own life. This approach magnifies the subtleties of his conception. Unlike his previous conceptual attempts to

explicate the sociohistorical conception of race, the autobiographical register demonstrates the complexity and multidimensionality of race. Du Bois would come to define his sociohistorical concept of race by explaining it in terms of the human life he knew best: his own. Yet he inverts his own approach to race: whereas he was once committed to theoretical conceptions of race, here he commits himself to elaborating upon that conception of race through a first-person account. Moreover, he elaborates on the context in which his thoughts on race developed. He claims that his education was responsible for how he thought about race. In *Dusk*, he reflects on four phases of his education and the general attitude about race that characterized them: geography, lack of conversation about race, dogmatic discussions about race, and the cultural and historical focus on race (2007a, 49–67). In the first phase, geographical distinctions are used to explain racial differences. In the second phase, explicit discussions of race are avoided, but racial tension is in the background and structures social interactions. In the third phase, race is openly discussed but is described only as a problem. In the final phase, at Harvard University, the cultural and cultural history aspects of race are emphasized. This marks another reason we must be specific about Du Bois's use of culture. This admission demonstrates that Du Bois is indeed mixing approaches to his concept of race and fighting several false tendencies in previous definitions of race. Beyond this epistemological goal, his admission supports the idea that he adopts a historical framing even in his reflections on how he came to propose a concept of race in the early period of his life.

### *Reflexive Practice*

Du Bois promotes a reflexive practice. We must not ignore to whom Du Bois delivered this address. He addressed the American Negro Academy, which was founded by Crummell. This organization of black intellectuals was dedicated to the promotion of higher education, arts, and science for African Americans as part of the overall struggle for racial equality. The American Negro Academy is the society of black men who made up the talented tenth, which Du Bois articulated soon after publishing "Conservation," which has been criticized for his "masculinist worldview" and upholding of respectability politics (James 1997, 35). An all-male organization, the American Negro Academy consisted of men with backgrounds in law, medicine, literature, religion, and community activism. Their collective goals were to lead and protect black people and to be shining examples of well-educated and capable black men—a destructive weapon to secure equality and destroy racism. The organization was formed to promote classical higher education for blacks, counter to Booker T. Washington's insistence on vocational training. Accordingly, the final intention of Du Bois in his address is to provide a plan of action for the improvement of African American life. No doubt this is the

impression that studying pragmatism left on him (Taylor 2004, 99). Du Bois's credo names seven policies, which outline a reflexive practice.

Du Bois was interested in human action as a sociologist, and he borrowed from pragmatism. There are two reasons for sociological inquiry: the immediate and mediate aims of any scientific inquiry and the aims of science and the utility of scientific results. The immediate aim of science is knowledge. Though Du Bois critiques the phenotypic conception of race and offers the sociohistorical conception of race as an improvement, he is still deeply concerned about science, as we need to gain broad knowledge about race. The mediate aims may vary, but social reform is the one upon which Du Bois focused throughout his career, and it begins in "Conservation." Recall, his most significant mention of the term *philosophy* is "to survey the whole question of race in human philosophy and to lay . . . [it] on a basis of broad knowledge and careful insight," and his mediate aim is to consider "those large lines of policy and higher ideals *which may form our guiding lines and boundaries* in the practical difficulties of every day" (2000, 108; emphasis in Du Bois). Lewis R. Gordon calls this Du Bois's "humanistic philosophy," which concerns all human sciences (2000b, 265). Robert Gooding-Williams calls this Du Bois's interest in scientific knowledge. Du Bois sketches three distinct answers to the question of sociological inquiry, each of which corresponds to a different conception of the object of social scientific knowledge: knowledge of social laws, knowledge of the scope and limits, and knowledge of moral facts (Gooding-Williams 2017). Much of this initial work appears in "Conservation," although commentators have mainly focused on Du Bois's later work to make these claims. Philosophical inquiry aims at scientific knowledge, and his training as a sociologist only serves Du Bois well in his endeavors.

Du Bois's credo outlines the reflexive actions African Americans should take to uplift themselves. By *reflexive*, I mean that they adopt a relational view of themselves—myself/themselves (the race)—and that this relational view subconsciously guides their habitus. The seven policies Du Bois outlines are controversial. For the sake of clarity, I will discuss each policy in turn. The first—"We believe that the Negro people, as a race, have a contribution to make to civilization and humanity, which no other race can make" (2000, 116)—is supported throughout the text but is most apparent in the opening lines, where Du Bois discusses the feeling that African Americans must minimize their racial identity. He suggests that this feeling has been brought on by outside influences who think negatively about black people. The title of the address also clearly indicates that he advised a policy that insists on the necessity of conservation of race. Hence, there is an obligation for African Americans to maintain their racial identity until the "mission of the Negro people is accomplished, and the ideal of human brotherhood has become a practical possibility" (117). The larger goal in which the Negro must be included is the advancement of modernity.

Du Bois was "rewriting of the historiography of his day" (Miles 2003, 20). This advancement is striving (German *streben*). At the end of his credo he says, "[O]nly earnest efforts on the part of the white people of this country will bring much needed reform in these matters" (117). With this, African Americans must resolve "to strive in every honorable way for the realization of the best and highest aims, for the development of strong manhood and pure womanhood, and for the rearing of a race ideal in America and Africa, to the glory of God and the uplifting of the Negro people" (117). Although the last policy indicates that striving is a practice itself, the other policies explain the necessity of this reflexive practice.

Du Bois announces four beliefs that he adopts and encourages other African Americans to adopt. He first asks the men in the room to endorse a belief in future racial harmony. He writes, "[U]nless modern civilization is a failure, it is entirely feasible and practicable for two races in such essential political, economic and religious *harmony* as the white and colored people of America, to develop side by side in peace and mutual happiness, the peculiar contribution which each has to make to *the culture of their common country*" (2000, 116; emphasis added). Similarly, the second belief Du Bois asks African Americans to adopt is the faith that the tension between whites and blacks be resolved. He suggests "a social equilibrium as would, throughout all the complicated relations of life, give due and just consideration to culture, ability, and moral worth, whether they be found under white or black skins" (117). The third belief he asks African Americans to adopt is about the hope that racial friction will subside as a result of their own action and practice. He writes, "[T]he first and greatest step toward the settlement of the present friction between the races—commonly called the Negro Problem—lies in the correction of the immorality, crime and laziness among the Negroes themselves, which still remains as a heritage from slavery" (117). The fourth belief he asks African Americans to adopt is a universalism concerning "economic and intellectual" ability (117)—that is, racial identity does not indicate economic or intellectual abilities.

Again, Du Bois's main reason for inquiring into the meaning of race was to uplift African Americans, specifically the American Negro Academy men in the room that day. These men had already overcome significant hardships to receive their educations and had become pillars in the black community. Cromwell was a lawyer who was born into slavery on September 5, 1846, in Portsmouth, Virginia, and had received his law degree from Howard University School of Law. He helped form the Virginia Educational and Historical Association and the National Colored Press Association, which later became the National Afro-American Press Association. Dunbar was a gifted poet and a godfather of the Harlem Renaissance. During his years at Central High School in Dayton, Ohio, he was the school's only student of color, but it was his academic performance that truly distinguished him. He served as editor in chief of the

school paper and president of the literary society. (His mother, a former slave, had taught him to read.) Miller was a mathematician and was admitted to the graduate program in Johns Hopkins University's Department of Mathematics in 1887. After two years, however, he withdrew from the university. In 1889 he reenrolled in a graduate program, this time at Howard University, earned a doctorate degree in mathematics, and was appointed professor there in 1890. These are the people whom Du Bois was addressing. And yet, in an attempt to arrive at the correct interpretation of the address, philosophers have overlooked this important aspect.

## 4

Many have paid little attention to the setting of the address, Du Bois's motivations for giving the address, and the literary devices Du Bois uses in the address. Instead, they have been concerned only with the explicit arguments in the text, determined to identify what his answer to their own questions might have been and to attach his words to a definitive theory. This is not the optimal way to read this text. It is best read as a text about the nature of philosophical inquiry. His philosophical concerns are clearly directed toward life; Du Bois examines the question of human nature in terms of his own life, to transform it, to exhort the men of the American Negro Academy to examine and transform their lives, and to uplift their race. Despite this aim, he has often been presented as being concerned primarily with the search for a definition of race. This portrait owes much to Appiah who, in his early essays, presents Du Bois as a thinker who commits an unthinkable argumentative fallacy. A fallacy that no good philosopher would ever have committed. Du Bois has also been presented as being concerned with the lived experience of African Americans. This portrait owes much to Outlaw, who, in his defense of Du Bois against Appiah, manages to distill Du Bois's address down to only its concreteness rather than its general philosophical import.

Three aspects of the specific conception of philosophical inquiry that we experience in "Conservation" are now apparent. As Du Bois attempts to provide a better conception of race, it requires him to give an account of how earlier conceptions are limited—philosophy as critique. As he defends the essentiality of history for the real meaning of race, we experience the overwhelming feeling that philosophy cannot and should not be done without attention to history—historicism. The most compelling aspect of this address is that it exhorts a reflexive practice—philosophy as praxis. For Du Bois, philosophical inquiry is one in which his thought and life are completely united, such that they cannot be separated from each other. Much though he was speaking to the men of the American Negro Academy that day, he was also reminding himself of his vocation. In reflecting on the vocation of the African American philosopher, Cornel West said it best: "If Afro-American philosophers are to make a

substantive contribution to the struggle for Afro-American freedom, it is imperative that we critically reevaluate the grand achievements of the past philosophical figures in the West and avoid falling into their alluring ahistorical traps" (West 1983, 58). There is no question that Du Bois set the example for us in this regard.

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