

# The Faithfulness to Fact

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## ABSTRACT

W.E.B. Du Bois regarded social reform as a legitimate object for the scientist. This paper argues that he gave a place to nonepistemic values in scientific reasoning and, to counter the effects of scientific racism, he constructed his approach around the belief that scientists must adopt an assumption or scientific hypothesis that African Americans are human. His engagement in scientific research was a way to reform the society in which he lived, which in turn, led him to defend the faithfulness to fact as his conception of scientific objectivity. This essay examines his sophisticated theory of facts, account of the difference between the natural and human sciences, and the unique instantiation of a pragmatist theory of truth.

*Nature*, widely regarded as one of the most reputable scientific journals in the world, recently announced that it is crucial to recognize and address racism as one of the “worst excesses” within the scientific community.<sup>1</sup> Before this declaration, Du Bois had already understood that scientific racism was entirely opposed to the truth. And I also believe that Du Bois makes a convincing case as to why scientists must be activist owing to his idea that scientists have a unique role to play in discovering the truth. In a display of scientific antiracism, the journal refuted the racist assertions made by white supremacists during the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia.<sup>2</sup>

Du Bois foresaw the potential harm if the scientific community tolerated any form of scientific racism. This essay is about the place he gives to ethical and political values in scientific reasoning. Although philosophers of science debate whether nonepistemic value judgments have a rightful place in scientific reasoning, Du Bois made room for them at the early stage of scientific hypothesis —“Assumption.”<sup>3</sup> Whether it was appropriate to allow nonepistemic values is a challenge for the philosophy of science, but Du Bois did so for a good reason. Throughout his life, he witnessed the troubling persistence of scientific racism and the ease with which science’s authority was weaponized against African Americans.

I have included these introductory remarks because it can be challenging to believe that people hold racist beliefs and act on them. The white supremacists who fought to take Charlottesville not only came armed with guns, but they also came with pseudoscience. And I want to consider how Du Bois might have justified the decision by the guest editors at *Nature* to disarm them

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of science's authority. I contend that Du Bois's perspective on the roles of ethical and political values in science transforms scientists into activists.

Firstly, I will discuss how Du Bois's conception of scientific objectivity is based on facts. He classifies facts into three categories: brute, social, and moral. Next, I will briefly address an interpretive issue concerning the aim and objectives of science for him. He firmly stated that the purpose of science is to seek the truth, but it has two objectives: truth and social reform. Scholars have claimed that he believed that science had two aims. This led some to believe that Du Bois had not made good on his argument from his student days that science and ethics could be reconciled.<sup>4</sup>

Then, I discuss Du Bois's active interest in the German philosophical discourse on the nature and methodologies of the human sciences at least in comparison to the natural sciences, presenting his definition and explanation of race. I explain how Du Bois distinguished the method of the human sciences, namely history and sociology, in that they rely on a hermeneutic-empiricist method distinct from the purely empiricist method of the natural sciences. For him, I show how history and sociology contextualize the natural sciences.

Finally, I consider Du Bois's theory of truth. He shifted from an idealistic conception to a pragmatic one, which explains how he reconciled truth and social reform. According to a broad pragmatist theory of truth, a scientist can deem a scientific claim truthful if and only if it serves a practical purpose. I take Du Bois to be instructive here as he shows precisely why scientists must also be activists if they are to fulfill their role in advancing epistemic democracy.<sup>5</sup>

## DU BOIS'S CAREER AS A SCIENTIFIC ACTIVIST

*Nature* contributed to the propagation of scientific racism by publishing erroneous ideas from figures like Francis Galton, who was at the forefront of the eugenics movement.<sup>6</sup> Du Bois implicitly challenged these misguided notions. Galton argued that ancestral traits, such as genius, determined human ability through heredity. He concluded that the intellectual standard of black people was "two grades" lower than that of white people.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, he boldly claimed that no white man had ever met a black man whom he considered superior, as though it were a fact.<sup>8</sup>

Galton's theory connected race to heredity and created a racial hierarchy based on intelligence. In "The Conservation of Races," Du Bois expresses concern about theories like Galton's:

The American Negro has always felt an intense personal interest in discussions as to the origins and destinies of races: primarily because back of most discussions of race with which he is familiar, have lurked *certain assumptions* as to his natural abilities, as to his political, intellectual and moral status, which he felt were wrong.<sup>9</sup>

He strongly believes naturalists are mistaken about race, but he does not stop there. Embarking on a career-long mission to debunk,<sup>10</sup> as Sally Haslanger has put it, and move to an ameliorative analysis of these inaccuracies. So Du Bois sought factual evidence. But addressing the flawed conclusions of naturalists like Galton was not just an intellectual endeavor for him but a matter of life and death. He thought such mistaken notions supported the disturbing and widespread view that African Americans were destined for extinction either by amalgamation or "self-obliteration."<sup>11</sup>

Du Bois's failure to completely denounce racial realism and "transcend" the biological conception of race as promised was the basis for Kwame Anthony Appiah's criticisms that Du Bois had indeed essentialized race.<sup>12</sup> To be fair to Du Bois, he was clear that the natural differences between races did not fully explain their more significant sociohistorical differences. Appiah's

concern about the implications of any notion of race because the risk it posed with racial essentialism is well-founded. We saw the damage in the perilous consequences of pseudoscience during the Battle of Charlottesville. So then, the resurgence of scientific racism today only validates Appiah's early apprehensions.<sup>13</sup> However, it is essential to note that while Du Bois potentially justifies some kind of natural realism, his critical stance towards discussions about race in the natural sciences remained unchanged. As both a scientist and the editor of *The Crisis*, the publication advocating for the advancement of African Americans during that era, he diligently evaluated scientific discoveries about race.

Du Bois's review of prominent scientists and popular scientific theories served two interconnected purposes: firstly, to expose the irrationality of scientific racism, and secondly, to help readers of *The Crisis* stay up to date on the latest scientific research on race.<sup>14</sup> In its inaugural issue, Du Bois declared that the magazine aimed to present "facts and arguments which highlight the dangers of race prejudice, particularly as manifested today towards colored people."<sup>15</sup> The magazine's goal was to portray the reality of African Americans accurately. During his time as editor, Du Bois was keen on identifying misinterpretations made by scientists and misapplications of scientific theories. One such instance involved Adam Clayton Powell, who requested that Du Bois publish a speech he had given at a previous NAACP meeting.<sup>16</sup> However, Du Bois declined to publish it because it misinterpreted Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection.<sup>17</sup>

In "The Conservation of Races," Du Bois paraphrased Darwin, asserting that although there are significant physical distinctions among different races, their similarities surpass these differences: "It declares, as Darwin himself said, that great as is the physical unlikeness of the various races of men their likenesses are greater, and upon this rests the whole scientific doctrine of Human Brotherhood." Du Bois believed that Darwin effectively showed that there is more diversity within a racial group than between different racial groups. Thus, Darwin's perspective supported Du Bois's belief that race deserved more than just a scientific definition.<sup>18</sup>

By the end of the nineteenth century, social Darwinism, the theory that people become powerful in society because they are innately better, was prevalent in intellectual circles. Herbert Spencer, a sociologist whom Du Bois criticized, played a significant role in establishing social Darwinism.<sup>19</sup> Spencer believed that natural selection influenced races, guaranteeing the survival of only the strongest competitors, which ultimately enhances society. Annoyed with Spencer's generalizations, Du Bois decided he would have to work backward to disprove them: "I was going to study the *facts*, any and all *facts*, concerning the American Negro and his plight, and by measurement and comparison and research, work up to any valid generalization which I could."<sup>20</sup> So, while Du Bois did not necessarily consider Powell a social Darwinist, he believed that Powell's use of the phrase "who ought to survive" indicated confusion in his thinking. Perhaps Du Bois was more worried that it could provide fodder for social Darwinists as it predetermined the superiority of those living while justifying the inferiority of the dead, not to mention all sorts of social inequalities. Due to this association with such harmful ideology and its lack of factual basis, he decided against including Powell's address. Some might find this verdict outrageous given its lack of outside review; however, it is essential not to forget that Du Bois held strong standards regarding objectivity.

### THREE KINDS OF FACTS

Because facts are central to Du Bois's conception of scientific objectivity, there are good reasons to believe that the norms he advocates for scientists revolve around how they gather factual evidence. Although there are elements of other scientific norms in his work, such as value-freedom and the avoidance of personal bias, a scientist's commitment to facts is the main way in which they can achieve scientific objectivity, as this section will show.<sup>21</sup> Although

the faithfulness to fact probably is the most fundamental conception of scientific objectivity, it is porous and frankly could admit several scientific norms. Value freedom typically creates a significant separation between scientists and society, making it less evident for Du Bois to choose it as a primary norm. In this passage from “My Evolving Plan for Negro Freedom,” he is clear that scientists should gather the facts: “I wanted to go further: to know what man could know and how to collect and interpret facts face to face.”<sup>22</sup> These two ideas underlie his commitment to facts: firstly, facts exist in the world; secondly, scientists discover, investigate, and organize them. And according to Du Bois, there are three kinds of facts: brute, social, and moral.

There are what Du Bois calls “bare facts,” which are brute facts.<sup>23</sup> These facts lack explanation yet still hold some epistemic value as they offer information, but without a complete understanding of the world. Due to their fundamental nature, he thinks scientists can easily manipulate them because they are oversimplified. Scientists commit fraud in research by changing the facts or emphasizing the ones supporting their scientific hypothesis and ignoring those that did not. Du Bois finds changing the facts to be particularly egregious, which he found in the race-science with figures like Galton and others.

Social facts, or what Du Bois calls “facts of life,” are more important than brute facts because they “modify, restrain, and re-direct the ordinary laws of nature.”<sup>24</sup> The “patent fact of race,” in a basic sense is that it structures our social lives.<sup>25</sup> Race-thinking is embedded in our language, and race shapes our cultural traditions. Racial inequality is institutional. Race has a lived-experience dimension. Du Bois maintains that each spiritually distinct race is constructed by historical and social factors. He posits that every spiritually distinct race owes its uniqueness and particular historical role to these factors. The notion that we could simply eliminate race is implausible even if we wanted to end racism. The case he makes for the social fact of race is why Du Bois is a constant reference point for contemporary social constructionists.<sup>26</sup> All this said, social scientists possess a unique ability to perceive the more obscure aspects of race, enabling them to provide a more precise understanding of it. For this reason, Du Bois says the “Historian and Sociologist” see the reality of race.<sup>27</sup>

Du Bois remarks that social scientists can affirm “moral facts.”<sup>28</sup> A social fact describes a condition of the social world, whereas a moral fact prescribes what ought to be the case or what ought not to be the case. If the social facts indicate that racial inequality exists, and it does, then the moral facts concern how we ought to fight for racial equality. With this, he harkened back to a view he held as a student that science and ethics could be brought together.<sup>29</sup>

## SCIENCE AND THE SCIENCES

Science seeks knowledge and comprehension of both the natural and social realms through a systematic approach. Du Bois defines philosophy as the “science of sciences,” making it the unified realm of knowledge.<sup>30</sup> In “The Study of Negro Problems,” he explains the purpose of science this way:

The object of these studies is primarily scientific—a *careful search for truth* conducted as thoroughly, broadly, and honestly as the material resources and mental equipment at command will allow; but this is *not our sole object*; we wish *not only* to make *the Truth* clear but to present it in such shape as will encourage and help social reform.<sup>31</sup>

To be clear, an aim serves as a clear path and guiding principle toward an objective, and an objective is the target or destination towards which actions are directed, representing the goal of an endeavor. In addressing this point, he continues by stating,

Its results lie open for the use of all men—merchants, physicians, men of letters, and philanthropists, but the *aim of science* itself is simple truth. Any attempt to give it a double aim, to make social reform the immediate instead of the *mediate object* of a search for truth, will inevitably tend to defeat *both objects*.<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, in *The Philadelphia Negro*, Du Bois mentions that social reform is the “final design” of the search for truth.<sup>33</sup> This strengthens the argument that social reform and the pursuit of truth are interconnected. Contrary to popular belief, which posits two distinct aims—one immediate and one mediate—I deny that science has competing objectives. To put it another way, social reform is part of the pursuit of truth, not separate from it.

Du Bois distinguished between the natural and human sciences in terms of method. In “Sociology Hesitant,” he elaborated on what he takes to be the fundamental distinction between the natural and social realms:

We would no longer have *two separate realms of knowledge*, speaking a mutually unintelligent language, but *one realm*, and in it physical science studying the manifestations of force and *natural law*, and the other, Sociology, assuming the data of physics and studying within these that realm where determinate force is acted on by *human wills*, by indeterminate force.<sup>34</sup>

In the natural sciences, including chemistry, astronomy, physics, and biology, scientists employ the empiricist method to establish the laws of nature. And, in the human sciences, such as psychology, history, political science, and sociology, scientists employ a hermeneutic-empiricist method to establish laws related to human action. Apart from resolving the question of method with the human sciences, there was a significant challenge with them in differentiating them from one another.<sup>35</sup> But Du Bois argued that human science observes laws like natural science but uniquely incorporates free will and individual actions, hence the need for a hermeneutic method. He criticized the commonplace definition of sociology as the study of society since it was too broad, arguing instead that it was the study of human action. Human science explores beyond what natural science can comprehend—placing it in an advantageous position for scientific objectivity by accurately explaining and understanding social conditions.

Wilhelm Dilthey’s contribution to the ongoing debate regarding the appropriate approach for the human sciences provides insight into Du Bois’s perspective on their methodology. However, it is important to note that no concrete evidence suggests that Du Bois specifically mentions Dilthey in his works. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that he did attend a course on the history of philosophy with Dilthey. Dilthey’s objective was to establish a philosophical basis for the human sciences.<sup>36</sup> He argued that while natural science explains phenomena by examining cause and effect, human science describes the interconnections between individuals and society. Du Bois held a similar view. Du Bois and Dilthey both believed that the natural sciences were socially situated and, as such, a purely empiricist method would not be appropriate for the human sciences. Against the view that the human sciences ought to adopt the empiricist method of the natural sciences, Du Bois was a proponent of the neo-Kantian, antipositivist approach to the human sciences. Empiricism focused on observable phenomena and couldn’t sufficiently explain why promoting pseudoscience is morally wrong.

## HISTORY AND SOCIOLOGY

Needless to say, history and sociology were the two most important human sciences for Du Bois. Sociology originated from history but before it developed, political economy was the sole study of human action. Considering his strong endorsement of history and sociology,

one might argue that he is a methodological historicist because he situates the natural sciences within a social context. Philosophers doubted the possibility of objective knowledge, many outright rejecting it. They opposed the idea that one could have scientific objectivity using empiricism. It was thought that we don't have enough access to the past to judge interpretations of it. Du Bois believed that history could be objective. In *Black Reconstruction*, he advised:

If history is going to be scientific, if the record of human action is going to be set down with that *accuracy and faithfulness of detail* which will allow its use as a measuring rod and guide-post for the future of nations, there must be set some standards of ethics in research and interpretation.<sup>37</sup>

In this passage, he elaborates on the norm historians ought to adopt to make judgments about the past. Historians should practice their craft with integrity. They should honor the historical record. They should document their sources and acknowledge their debts to the work of other scholars.

Two further principles of historicism are present in Du Bois's work: one, to give history autonomy, and two, to historicize the human world on the individual and collective levels. Implicit in the argument to legitimize history as a science, methodological historicists assign autonomy to history. In "The Conservation of Races," Du Bois writes,

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.<sup>38</sup>

Du Bois's sociohistorical definition of race coincides with his explanation of the existence of spiritually distinct races. Every historical event can be explained using methods from human science rather than natural science. As historical knowledge shapes our understanding of the world, it gives precedence to explaining sociohistorical phenomena through hermeneutic methods. Thus, attempts at explaining sociohistorical events using solely nonhistorical methods go against historicist impulses. The empiricist method alone cannot provide an understanding of the historical world. Du Bois's definition claims that each race, with its own unique spiritual essence, is fundamentally shaped by the historical and social factors outlined in his definition of race.

A methodological historicist would maintain that history is a legitimate science. History attempts to discover meaning or the direction of history. Du Bois believed in an intelligible process moving towards a specific condition—the realization of social reform. He made a place for the natural and the human in a dialectical scheme. By contrast, a metaphysical historicist would historicize all aspects of the world proving a singular and complete interpretation. Methodological historicists argue only that everything that happens in the world is part of history. Values, institutions, and social relations are products of historical development. He writes about this in "The Study of Negro Problems":

Scientific work must be subdivided, but conclusions which affect the whole subject must be based on a study of the whole. One cannot study the Negro in freedom and come to general conclusions about his destiny *without knowing his history in slavery*. A vast set of problems having a common centre must, too, be studied according to some general plan, if the work of different students is to be compared or to go toward building a unified body of knowledge.<sup>39</sup>

Everything in the world must be understood within its historical contexts. Historical conditions shape all human values and institutions; therefore, they must be examined within that context. In other words, historicists contextualize.

Du Bois chronicles his cultural achievements not just as a literary endeavor but also as an essential contribution to reporting historical events accurately. Narratives like his play a crucial role in enhancing our historical understanding by providing information that can be translated into social facts using hermeneutic methods employed by historians. Consistent with the methodological historicist's agenda to historicize the human world, he historicizes his changing view of race. Because the past and present perceptions shape the present, he considers the formation of his historical consciousness and personal memory. His 1940 book *Dusk of Dawn* is subtitled "an autobiography of a race concept." Of course, this leads one to wonder if accuracy is possible to any extent. Du Bois narrates his life from the first-person perspective. The autobiography is historical account of his changing views of the discourse about race.

Everything in the human world is part of history. This principle seems obvious, but the details indicate how historicists give it two special meanings. The historicist denies that values, institutions, and social relations are unchanging. All human values and institutions are the byproduct of historical development. This opposes the naturalistic tendency to immortalize specific values and institutions for humanity in general for all time. Second, the historicist maintains that everything in the human world must be understood considering its conditions. All human values and institutions are byproducts of their historical context and, as such, must be represented in that context. Historicists contextualize, and historians are contextualists.

Scholars haven't discussed Du Bois's empiricism nor what, if any, bearing it has on his theory of truth. Du Bois does not answer all these problems, so he must shift how he thinks about truth itself. Since he is an empiricist and holds that knowledge originates in experience, explaining social phenomena in empirical terms is to explain them in historical terms. The laws of history are determinable to a degree, but such laws are not absolute. Individuals are rather unpredictable, given that they are free. Part of Appiah's argument is that Du Bois's life itself reflects what he believed was the truth about race.<sup>40</sup>

History as the record of human action and sociology as the study of human action are thus inextricably linked. His insistence on using history to bring American social and political systems closer to the people's ideal means that historians have a key role in societal progress when motivated to tell the truth and make it publicly available, ratifying history as a science.

## TWO THEORIES OF TRUTH

Given the overlap between the purpose of science—to search for truth—and the immediate object of it—simple truth—it is prudent for our purposes to consider what truth means for Du Bois. Of course, the answer is by no means straightforward. Though I note that Appiah saw how important truth was for Du Bois.

I will begin, therefore, by saying what I think the rough truth is about race, because, against the stream, I am disposed to argue that this struggle toward the truth is exactly what we find in the life of Du Bois, who can claim, in my view, to have thought longer, more engagedly, and more publicly about race than any other social theorist of our century.<sup>41</sup>

Likewise, the truth about race for Appiah would come through his engagement with the then-contemporary biological consensus about race. Du Bois would not have gone to the scientists of his time since they had already assumed that African Americans were naturally inferior. Yet, Appiah relies on biologists to explain that biologists have nothing to say about race, or at the

very least, their consensus provided little evidence that we ought to conserve race, as Du Bois argues. My point is that the more mature Du Bois would only defer to the scientists of his time if and only if they adopted an assumption of humanity because only then could their findings tell us something meaningful about race and show us how to combat racism. Tommy J. Curry correctly sees that Du Bois's understanding of truth changed: "It was his decision to pursue a methodology dedicated to 'chance' that dissuaded Du Bois from his search for Truth—with a capital 'T'."<sup>42</sup> Du Bois moves away from an idealistic conception of truth, which could not be achieved no matter what norms scientists followed as there were no criteria for how many facts or what kind of them would be enough to constitute a claim to be truthful.

Absolute truth is steadfast regardless of any parameters or context. The term "absolute" implies qualities such as surpassing all limits, an encompassing truth, and unchanging truth. In his early work, Du Bois capitalizes the first letter in Truth because it is an object. Absolute Truth is universal, unchanging, and, most importantly, for him, knowable. He was "determined to go to the best university in the land and, if possible, in the world, to discover Truth, which I spelled with a capital."<sup>43</sup> However, he left Fisk not because there were better teachers at Harvard but because of a "broader atmosphere for approaching the truth."<sup>44</sup> The religious environment at Fisk made an idealistic conception of truth attractive at one stage. Still, he would only abandon the educational environment he felt did not serve him in his pursuit of the truth. He would move to an educational environment he believed would serve him better in his pursuit. Du Bois would attend Harvard while William James was developing pragmatism.<sup>45</sup> James was one of his teachers, but so were George Santayana and Josiah Royce. Charles S. Peirce would have arrived after Du Bois's student days.

Pragmatic theories of truth are usually associated either with James's proposal that truth be defined in terms of utility or Peirce's proposal that true beliefs will be accepted "at the end of inquiry." Recall social reform is the end of the search for the truth. In general, however, pragmatic theories focus on the connection between truth and epistemic practices, notably practices of inquiry and assertion. While true statements might be useful to believe, they result from an inquiry having withstood ongoing examination to be reputable scientific claims, that is, those backed by facts. Pragmatic theories are often considered an alternative to correspondence theories of truth, such as the idealistic conception he seemed to adopt early on. But correspondence theories tend to see truth as a static relation between a truth-bearer and a truth-maker, whereas pragmatic theories of truth tend to view truth as a function of the practices people engage in and the commitments people make when they solve problems, make assertions, or conduct scientific inquiry. More broadly, though backed by facts. Pragmatic theories emphasize the significant role of the concept of truth across various disciplines and discourses: scientific and fact-stating and ethical, legal, and political discourse.

Du Bois's perspective on pragmatism is rather unexpected if one adheres to the notion that Du Bois was solely influenced by James:

I assumed the existence of truth since to *assume* anything else or not to *assume* was unthinkable. I *assumed that Truth* was only partially knowable but was ultimately largely knowable, although perhaps forever in part unknowable. Science adopted the hypothesis of the Knower and something Known. The Jamesian Pragmatism as I understood it from his lips was not based on the "usefulness" of a hypothesis but on its workable logic *if its* truth was assumed.<sup>46</sup>

While James's pragmatism focuses on usefulness, Du Bois would focus on what would have to be the case for it to be helpful. James is only slightly caricatured in saying that his conception of truth is just whatever is useful to believe. Du Bois's view is considerably more complicated, so he will elaborate on what utility means for James. And yet, scholars don't realize how unique



Du Bois is when discussing him as a pragmatist. His theory manages to answer the question James's theory raises about the meaning of usefulness with a 'for what?' and 'for whom?' In *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois is clear about his answer to these questions:

Thus by the *sheer logic of facts*, there arose in the United States a clear and definite *program for the freedom and uplift of the Negro*, and for the extension of the *realization of democracy*.<sup>47</sup>

Du Bois's pragmatism might be understood as the bridge to Peircean pragmatism, focused on accuracy and conceptual refinement instead of some general notion of utility. I should be clear that this is not a claim about what Du Bois was inspired by; there is no textual evidence that he had ever read or considered Pierce explicitly. However, his philosophical education at Harvard during the reign of the pragmatists in the philosophy department gave him a clear mechanism to become familiar with these ideas. It is hard to deny that he belongs to the American pragmatist tradition, if only partially or in some general way.<sup>48</sup>

While Du Bois seems to believe that Truth exists, as he said to Aptheker, he doubts scientists can grasp it. They gather as many social facts as they can. Peirce and James diverge significantly in their views on truth. According to Peirce, truth cannot be divorced from scientific and empirical investigation. Conversely, James considers truth to be more closely tied to utility, likening it to a form of recognition or approval for claims that are beneficial for us to believe. However, Peirce retains the concept of objective truths that exist independently of individuals. He asserts that objective truths are reached through inquiry, whereas James contends that we can largely determine what is true based on its usefulness. Peirce's theory of truth relies on verification, James's gave truth a distance relation between it and its outcomes.

For Peirce, however, pragmatism takes on a meaning far more scientifically inclined. The purpose of pragmatism is to center a certain kind of empirical investigation: the kind of investigation that scientists do. This isn't pure empiricism; only the fundamental findings of a natural science like physics play a role in our intellectual inquiry. Rather, for Du Bois, it's a *hermeneutic-empiricism* that holds that we should only be investigating phenomena that make some empirical difference in the world—that is, a difference in the way things are in an empirically detectable way, particularly in terms of social change. This, importantly, is not a claim about what is of significance to us in a moral sense, what we find important, or what we would like to be true. Rather, it is simply a claim about the role of concepts and the role of intellectual and empirical inquiry in science broadly construed.

Du Bois developed his theory of truth in the context of his views of history and the emerging field of sociology. In the same letter to Aptheker, he reflects on his turn to scientific hypothesis after he stopped pursuing an idealistic conception of truth:

I gave up the search of "Absolute" Truth; not from doubt of the existence of reality, but because I believe that our limited knowledge and clumsy methods of research made it impossible now completely to apprehend Truth. I nevertheless firmly believed that gradually the human mind and absolute and provable truth would approach each other nearer and nearer and yet never in all eternity meet. I therefore turned to *Assumption—scientific Hypothesis*. I assumed the existence of Truth since to assume anything else or not to assume was unthinkable.<sup>49</sup>

Du Bois previously explained in the introduction to *Black Reconstruction* that African Americans are human, what this essay calls the assumption of humanity:

If he believes that the Negro in America and in general is an average and ordinary human being, who under given environment develops like any other human beings then he will read

this story and judge it by *the facts adduced*. If, however, he regards the Negro as a distinctly inferior creation, who can never successfully participate in civilization and whose emancipation and enfranchisement were gestures against nature, then he will need something more than the *sorts of facts* I have just set down. But this latter person, I am not trying to convince. I am simply pointing out these two points of view. So obvious to Americans, and then without further ado, I am assuming the truth of first.<sup>50</sup>

In this passage, Du Bois clarifies what the scientific hypothesis must assume.

It is essential to note that Du Bois did not believe that scientists were the only truth-seekers. They include artists, prophets, and philosophers too. The artist, for Du Bois, has a special relationship to truth. In “The Criteria of Negro,” he explains, “I am one who *tells the truth* and exposes evil and seeks with Beauty and for Beauty to set the world right.”<sup>51</sup> Then, beauty is an expression above right and truth, and as such inseparable from them. Beauty is not that which is in the eye of the beholder.<sup>52</sup> It is classical, universal, and transhistorical. For him, it makes truth somewhat knowable but eternally unknowable. The existence of art means that we understand others and give them attention and sympathy. The artist doesn’t gather the facts. Scientists do. The artist expresses what is beautiful, truthful, and ethical about the facts. Du Bois goes on to make a controversial statement that the purpose of art is propaganda. Art is supposed to move us to act politically.

Du Bois gives the philosopher a hermeneutic role when he says philosophers “interpret” the facts.<sup>53</sup> This role is evident when considering Du Bois’s conception of philosophy as the “science of sciences.”<sup>54</sup> Setting aside the specifics of Curry’s argument, I just want to consider the fact that Curry slightly misrepresented Du Bois’s view on what the philosopher is supposed to do. The resulting imperative from Curry’s argument that the philosopher acts more as a social scientist is inappropriate and not one for which Du Bois would have agreed. To be charitable to Curry, I suspect that our disagreement might just turn on differing views about the nature of philosophy. But I also believe clarifying his view helps to establish philosophy’s import for the democratic experiment. Curry narrows his thesis: “I argue that race-gender theories . . . are in actuality ad hoc accounts of group formation determined primarily by political ideology, not an actual account of empirical phenomena.”<sup>55</sup> Social scientists gather social facts. So, Du Bois would agree with Curry’s argument that philosophies of this social nature need an empirical basis. But, it must be said that philosophers don’t always generate adequate theories. Philosophy is merely about arguing against some theories and offering others. Philosophers dispute each other about which theories are acceptable and unacceptable, in what ways. Sometimes, the foundation of theories is empirical, but Curry is right most times, they have not been. But, for Du Bois in the end, the strength of any theory will all depend on the reliability and comprehensiveness of the current scientific findings.

## CONCLUSION

Du Bois might have praised the guest editor’s decision to speak against scientific racism if he had lived to see it. The global scientific community that *Nature* represents is powerful if its approximate impact factor of 64.8 now is any indication, and it is. The journal asserts that it upholds three ethical and political values. It first describes the scientific community it represents and the scientific norms it intends to uphold:

As members of the scientific community, we are committed to supporting the research enterprise by curating, enhancing and disseminating research that is rigorous, reproducible and impactful. We work to promote openness and transparency as well as the highest standards in research culture.<sup>56</sup>

This second statement makes clear that scientists make judgments using political values:

We provide an independent forum for reporting and discussing issues concerning research and the community, and we engage with researchers at all stages of their career to understand their needs and advocate for positive change.<sup>57</sup>

This final statement makes clear that scientists have judgment using ethical values:

We believe that science should represent everyone. As such, we recognize that it is our responsibility to work towards overcoming inequities and to foster a culture of diversity and inclusion in our communities.<sup>58</sup>

The stance against scientific racism, even if only symbolically, meant that the scientific community that *Nature* represents had accepted its responsibility as a leading force in pursuing truth when they announced it. And with great power comes great responsibility, as they say.

One objection to my argument that Du Bois adopted the faithfulness to fact is that it is a conception of scientific objectivity that maintains that scientific claims are objective only if we can separate them from the scientists themselves. But since scientists advocate for the truth, for him, they can't be detached from the things they say. Scientists are not mere collectors of facts; they seek explanations and understanding in their work. Pursuing truth becomes imperative for scientists who must communicate it accurately, that is, faithfully. During a night as a student, Du Bois describes himself as a mouthpiece for the truth: "I had told the truth as I learned it and understood it with severe accuracy."<sup>59</sup> He believed that it was important for society to know the truth. Du Bois shows us that Americans can only trust what scientists say if they remain faithful to the facts, that is, contribute to a reliable body of facts. Scientists would have to just assume at the stage of scientific hypothesis that African Americans were a people who deserved to live like all other people.

## NOTES

1. "RACISM: Overcoming Science's Toxic Legacy," *Nature News*, October 20, 2022. <https://www.nature.com/immersive/d42859-022-00031-8/index.html>.

*Nature* is a weekly international journal publishing the finest peer-reviewed research in all fields of science and technology on the basis of its originality, importance, interdisciplinary interest, timeliness, accessibility, elegance and surprising conclusions. *Nature* also provides rapid, authoritative, insightful and arresting news and interpretation of topical and coming trends affecting science, scientists and the wider public. (<https://www.nature.com/nature/journal-information>)

2. Ramin Skibba, "The Disturbing Resilience of Scientific Racism," *Smithsonian Magazine*, May 20, 2019. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/disturbing-resilience-scientific-racism-180972243/>.
3. Du Bois, *The Correspondence of W.E.B. Du Bois, vol. 3: 1944–1963*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1978), 395. Epistemic value judgments are indicators of truth, whereas nonepistemic value judgments are indicators of something else.
4. See Ronald A.T. Judy, "Introduction: On W.E.B. Du Bois and Hyperbolic Thinking," *boundary 2* 27(3) (2000): 1–35.
5. For discussion of Du Bois's theory of democracy, see Lawrie Balfour, *Reconstructing Democracy: Thinking Politically with W.E.B. Du Bois* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). And: Derrick Darby, "Du Bois's Defense of Democracy," in *Democratic Failure*, ed. Melissa Schwartzberg and Daniel Viehoff (New York: New York University, 2020), 207–46. For discussion about how he advances epistemic democracy, see Liam Kofi Bright, "Du Bois' Democratic Defence of the Value Free Ideal," *Synthese* 195(5) (2018): 2227–45.
6. See Francis Galton, "Distribution of Successes and of Natural Ability among the Kinsfolk of Fellows of the Royal Society," *Nature* 70 (1904): 354–56.
7. Francis Galton, *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry into its Laws and Consequences* (London: Macmillan and Co. and New York, 1892), 338.

8. *Ibid.*, 339.
9. Du Bois, "The Conservation of Races," in *W.E.B. DuBois: Writings* (New York: Library of America 1986), 817. Italics mine.
10. <https://www.mit.edu/~shaslang/papers/HaslangerSCDP.pdf>
11. *Ibid.*, 821.
12. Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument," in "*Race, Writing, and Difference*," ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 21–37, 36.
13. See Angela Saini, *Superior: The Return of Race Science* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019).
14. See Jordan Fox Besek, Patrick Trent Greiner, and Brent Clark, "W.E.B. Du Bois and Interdisciplinarity: A Comprehensive Picture of the Scholar's Approach to Natural Science," *Journal of Classical Sociology* 21(2) (2021): 144–64.
15. Du Bois, "Editorial," *The Crisis* 1(1) (1910): 10. Italics mine.
16. Du Bois, "Letter from W.E.B. Du Bois to A. Clayton Powell," February 25, 1932. *W.E.B. Du Bois Papers* (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.
17. See Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1860).
18. *Ibid.*, 816.
19. See Herbert Spencer, *Principles of Biology* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1897).
20. Du Bois, *Writings*, op. cit., 590–91.
21. See Liam Kofi Bright, "Du Bois' Democratic Defence of the Value Free Ideal," op. cit., 2227–45.
22. Du Bois, "My Evolving Program for Negro Freedom," *Clinical Sociology Review* 8(1) (1990): 33.
23. W.E.B. Du Bois, "Sociology Hesitant," *boundary 2* 27(3) (2000): 43.
24. *Ibid.*, 41.
25. Du Bois, *Writings*, op. cit., 817.
26. See Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, "The Essential Social Fact of Race," *American Sociological Review* 64(6) (1999): 899–906.
27. Du Bois, *Writings*, op. cit., 817.
28. Du Bois, "Sociology Hesitant," op. cit., 43.
29. Du Bois, "The Renaissance of Ethics: A Critical Comparison of Scholastic and Modern Ethics," 1889.
30. Du Bois, "My Evolving Program for Negro Freedom," op. cit. 33.
31. Du Bois, "The Study of Negro Problems," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 11 (1898): 16. Italics mine.
32. *Ibid.*
33. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1.
34. Du Bois, "Sociology Hesitant," op. cit., 43.
35. For example, Wilhelm Windelband categorized them into two groups: nomothetic fields, like economics, which aim to establish laws, and idiographic fields, such as history, which focus on specific details. See Windelband, "History and Natural Science," *Theory & Psychology* 8(1) (1998): 5–22.
36. See Wilhelm Dilthey, *Introduction to the Human Sciences*, eds. Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). Scholars have explored the connection between Du Bois and Dilthey. See Robert Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), esp. 47–49; Appiah, *W.E.B. Du Bois and the Emergence of Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014, esp. 78–82; Nahum Chandler, *X—The Problem of the Negro as a Problem of Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), esp. 34–35.
37. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York: Library of America, 2021), 854.
38. Du Bois, *Writings*, op. cit., 817.
39. Du Bois, "The Study of Negro Problems," op. cit., 12.
40. Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument," op. cit., 22.
41. *Ibid.*
42. Tommy J. Curry, "Empirical or Imperial? Issues in the Manipulation of Du Bois' Intellectual Historiography in Kwame Anthony Appiah's *Lines of Descent*," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 35(1–2) (2014): 391.
43. Du Bois, "My Evolving Program for Negro Freedom," op. cit., 33–34.
44. *Ibid.*
45. There is literature that debates Du Bois's relationship to James. See James Campbell, "Du Bois and James," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 28(3) (1992): 569–81. Saladin Ambar, "Du Bois and James at Harvard: The Challenges of Fraternal Pairings and Racial Theory," *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics* 4(2) (2019): 352–77.

46. Du Bois, *The Correspondence of W.E.B Du Bois*, op. cit., 394. Italics mine.
47. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, op. cit., 189.
48. See Nancy Muller Milligan, "W.E.B. DuBois' American Pragmatism," *Journal of American Culture* 8(2) (1985): 31–38; Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1989); Paul C. Taylor, "What's the Use of Calling Du Bois a Pragmatist?" *Metaphilosophy* 35(1/2) (2004): 99–114.
49. Du Bois, *The Correspondence of W.E.B. Du Bois*, op. cit., 395.
50. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, op. cit., 1.
51. Du Bois, "The Criteria of Negro Art," *The Crisis* 32 (October 1926): 292.
52. See Paul C. Taylor, "Beauty to Set the World Right: The Politics of Black Aesthetics," in *Black Is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics*, (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 77–103.
53. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, op. cit., 867.
54. Du Bois, "My Evolving Problem for Negro Freedom," op. cit., 33.
55. Curry, "Must There Be an Empirical Basis for the Theorization of Racialized Subjects in Race-Gender Theory?" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 121(1) (2021): 21–44, 22.
56. Editors of *Nature* believe in the transformational power of science and its potential to drive positive change in the world. <https://www.nature.com/nature/editorial-values-statement>.
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid.
59. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, op. cit., 7.