

The Educational Philosophy of W.E.B. DuBois

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After being black-listed for many years, the works of W.E.B. DuBois are once again being published, read, discussed, and written about both in the popular cultural arena and within the enclaves of academia. To those who have followed his career this is a welcome turn of events which speaks well for a society and publishing industry that for many decades turned its back on DuBois's writings and, either deliberately or by default, foreclosed the hearing of whatever truths might lie within them. The 1993 Pulitzer Prize-winning biography by David Levering Lewis along with the more recent two-hour television documentary biography by Louis Massiah are indications that DuBois's influence is once again being felt throughout the country.¹ Harvard University now has a research center named for him (headed by Henry Louis Gates), and the University of Massachusetts library now houses most of his important papers. This is nothing short of a minor miracle given the fact that at age ninety-one DuBois joined the Communist party and gave up seeking freedom in America by moving to Accra, Ghana in West Africa.

Who was W.E.B. DuBois? What was his educational philosophy, and why is it important to us today? To begin to answer these questions, DuBois's life must be situated within the context of a society struggling with issues of race and class at the end of the nineteenth century. Born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts in 1868, DuBois died in Ghana in 1963 at the age of ninety-five. This period of time — from 1868 to 1963, five years after the Emancipation Proclamation and seven years beyond the Brown decision — was extremely significant for African Americans. And it was DuBois who came to play a key role in helping to shape the direction of that community's fight for freedom during this period. After receiving his second B.A. degree from Harvard with honors in 1890 (he had received his first B.A. from Fisk University in 1888) he went on in 1895 to become the first African American to receive a Ph.D. from Harvard. His dissertation in history (*The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States in America, 1638-1870*) ultimately was selected to be the first volume in the now famous Harvard Historical Series. Besides publishing some twenty-odd books during his long life, some of his other accomplishments include playing a major role in the founding of the NAACP in 1910, the founding the Pan African Congress in Paris in 1919, founding and editing of the journal *Phylon*, and serving as editor of the Atlanta University studies which were among the first empirical studies done on the African-American community in the United States.

DUBOIS AGAINST WASHINGTON

DuBois is probably best known for his now famous encounters with Booker T. Washington. At the point in time when these encounters took place, Washington had become the unchallenged leader of the black community, and by many accounts, the most powerful black man in the country. No other African American could count

among his friends such individuals as Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, and the railroad magnate Collis P. Huntington. These men became Washington's financiers and Washington's political power in large measure was a direct result of their influence and support. DuBois was a young professor at Atlanta University in 1903 when he decided to challenge what he considered to be Washington's program of appeasement and accommodation. A key component of that program, which by and large had been designed to not ruffle any Southern feathers, was the type of educational curriculum Washington implemented at Alabama's Tuskegee Institute. Largely vocationally based, Washington's program primarily focused on agricultural and industrial education. And though DuBois did not necessarily oppose agricultural and industrial education, he did not feel that it should be the primary emphasis of a college education. DuBois felt that the intellectual training of the mind should be primary and that "the purpose of education was not to make men carpenters, but to make carpenters men." Consequently, in his 1903 book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois decided to challenge Washington's program publicly. In a chapter entitled "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others," DuBois not only took aim at Washington's educational program, but also, significantly, at the politics Washington engaged in to bring it about.

Although DuBois wrote many articles and gave numerous talks on education both before and after his 1903 book, he is generally not seen as an educational philosopher. This is true perhaps because he wrote in so many different disciplines and on such a wide variety of topics. And he was so prolific that one biographer has estimated that he must have written something almost every day of his adult life. He wrote novels and poetry. He wrote journalism and served as editor of *The Crisis* magazine for over twenty years. He wrote sociological treatises and his groundbreaking sociological study on the Philadelphia Negro is still considered a classic. Additionally, he was a historian and essayist, and it is DuBois the essayist on whom I want to focus in this essay — primarily the essayist reflected in the book *The Souls of Black Folk*.

THE INFLUENCE OF JAMES, SANTANA, AND ROYCE

One of the keys to understanding DuBois's opposition to Washington and to understanding *Souls* as an education text is to look at the influences he came under as an undergraduate at Harvard. While DuBois quite literally had become conscious of himself as a black person at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, it was at Harvard that he acquired much of the philosophy that would guide him for the rest of his life. During his first year at Harvard he met William James, who became his teacher and mentor. James was not nationally known at the time DuBois was his student, but he was well on his way to becoming the primary exponent of pragmatism that he is known as today. DuBois revealed in his autobiography that he was a visitor in James's home on many occasions and he acknowledged that it was his relationship with James that helped him to survive as one of only two blacks at Harvard in the 1890s. While at Harvard, DuBois would also come under the influence of Josiah Royce and George Santayana — two Harvard faculty members who also were destined to become internationally respected and highly influential. While a student

in James's Philosophy 4 class, DuBois wrote a fifty-two page paper entitled "The Renaissance of Ethics," which impressed his teacher. And, according to DuBois's biographer David Levering Lewis,

By the end of the second semester...[DuBois] believed he might be about to crack one of philosophy's great perennial [questions] — [the] justification of moral conduct through empirical observation....[His] proposed way out of this dilemma was through what he called duty. The fundamental question of the Universe involved duty DuBois felt. Not the duty of the highest good but the duty of the obligation to know how much better is the best that can be than the worst?...The whole purpose of duty hangs upon the Cause and Purpose of this great drama we call life...and to understand duty...we must understand ends....Ethical science will come slowly...if the cornerstone of the world structure [guided by science, becomes] first the what, then the why — underneath the everlasting Ought.²

The *what* for DuBois was the *what* one was to do with one's life; the *why* was the rationale one used to justify to oneself one's actions; and the Ought was the Almighty Universal Moral Guide or Principle under which one conducts his daily life. In other words, for DuBois's, "ethical imperatives arose out of the interaction of mind and matter as both became transformed and purposive through willpower."³

If James had caused DuBois to reflect deeply on the role of duty and will in life, it was George Santayana and to a lesser extent Josiah Royce who, by introducing him to a deeper understanding of Hegel, caused him to question even more deeply his mentor's view of the world. In the *Renaissance of Ethics*, DuBois had already started to critique James by questioning his rather passive view of the role that consciousness plays in one's life and his passive reliance on faith in shaping one's destiny. DuBois felt that this passivity amounted to giving in to the *future* as the ultimate *master* and *king* over one's life. Creative activity or work, for DuBois, then becomes the path by which one could shape one's life and influence one's environment. DuBois eventually comes to see this path as a tool that his people could use to fashion their freedom. DuBois's understanding of Hegel then becomes central to his project of freedom in *The Souls of Black Folk*.

The part of Hegel that apparently resonated with DuBois was Hegel's description of the master/slave relationship. Symbolizing two opposing forms of consciousness, the master and the slave for Hegel come to recognize that the freedom of the other is determined and limited by the other. The master cannot be free, Hegel argues, because his consciousness has become dependent on the slave. The slave, on the other hand, comes to see that the possibility of his true freedom lies in his labor and the ability to see himself as a separate consciousness. Shamoan Zamir gives an in-depth description of Hegel's view:

In the *Phenomenology*, the master does not seek recognition from the slave. Rather, he comes to recognize that his own freedom is dependent on the slave *and his labor* and is therefore a determined freedom and not an absolute and indeterminate one as he had thought: "for, just where the master has effectively achieved lordship, he really finds that something has come about quite different from an independent consciousness." It is not an independent, but rather a dependent consciousness that he has achieved. He is thus not assured of self-existence as his truth; he finds that his truth is rather the unessential consciousness [of the dependent slave], and the fortuitous unessential action of that consciousnessFurther, "the master is brought to 'an existential impasse' not by acknowledging the humanity of the slave and then

seeking mutual recognition, but by recognizing that he himself is materialized through the property made by the slave. And just as the master comes to discover his dependency through the labor of the slave, so the slave discovers therein the possibility of his own consciousness passing “into real and true independence”. . . . Hegel is quite clear that “for recognition proper there is needed the moment that what the master does to the other he should also do to himself, and what the bondsman does to himself, he should do to the other also. . . . Without this mutual labor, recognition remains ‘one sided and unequal.’”⁴

THE SOULS OF BLACK FOLK

Zamir’s recasting of *Souls* within a Hegelian context throws new light on DuBois’ project. Although for many years now considered a classic, *Souls* until recently has been primarily considered as a book of loosely connected essays written to explain black life and culture to a largely white audience at the beginning of the twentieth century. What contributed to this perception was that many of the essays had been published in magazines such as *The Atlantic* prior to their collective publication in *Souls*. What has been missed, however, is that DuBois reworked many of the essays especially for their publication as a cohesive work of art. And seeing *Souls* as a cohesive work of art cast within a Hegelian context reveals that DuBois had much more in mind than just a description of black culture and the black community to a white reading public.

Consciousness, self-consciousness, power, work, freedom, and the role of creative resistance are all addressed as tools of liberation for the master and the slave. These issues have been, for the most part, missed by scholars until now, primarily because DuBois chose to dramatize them by looking at his own life experiences. Zamir says that the book starts off with DuBois growing up as a young child in New England and then moves logically to the end with the adult DuBois as a college professor, listening to and intuitively imbibing the meaning of the spiritual sorrow songs of slavery.

Without taking the time to go through the whole book, it is however, instructive to look at the first chapter which DuBois called “Of our Spiritual Strivings.” This chapter opens with DuBois as a young child at a school function with his white classmates. On this occasion they are exchanging greeting cards when a girl whom DuBois describes as “a tall newcomer” refused to accept his card. These are his words:

In a wee wooden schoolhouse, something put it into the boys’ and girls’ heads to buy gorgeous visiting cards — ten cents a package — and exchange. The exchange was merry, till one girl, a tall newcomer, refused my card — refused it preemptorily, with a glance. Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil. I had thereafter no desire to tear down that veil, to creep through; I held all beyond it in common contempt, and lived above it in a region of blue sky and great wandering shadows.⁵

This incident for the adult DuBois who has now read Hegel, says Zamir, represents consciousness becoming self-conscious through a recognition of itself. It also becomes (for DuBois) the symbolized struggle for mutual freedom between the master and slave. For Hegel as for DuBois, the master and the slave are locked in a mutually interdependent consciousness they both somehow must move beyond. Through this schoolhouse incident DuBois instantly recognizes that he is behind a veil which will forever prevent him from being a part of the life beyond the veil. His

solution to this problem is to dwell above the veil where the sky is blue and there are great wandering shadows. The veil throughout *Souls* is used to symbolize an invisible barrier that separates the black and white communities; a barrier that allows a mutual visibility while at the same time preventing a joining of conscious understanding with true communication and knowledge.

DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS AND FREEDOM

For DuBois, this sense of being a part of and yet separate from, becomes manifested as double consciousness in the black community; something that the veil will prevent the white community from ever fully understanding. Here are DuBois' words:

the Negro is sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world — a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.⁶

DuBois then goes on to describe what an educational curriculum designed to liberate his people would accomplish. The experiences of the past had, according to DuBois,

changed the child of Emancipation to the youth with dawning self-consciousness, self-realization, self-respect. In those sombre forests of his striving his own soul rose before him, and he saw himself — darkly as through a veil; and yet he saw in himself some faint revelation of his power, of his mission. He began to have dim feeling that, to attain his place in the world, he must be himself, and not another.⁷

The Negro, for DuBois, had been changed into the Other through the experience of slavery, which had stripped him of his cultural consciousness. The dawning of self-consciousness was the beginning of this knowledge, and a true education based on his historical knowledge would fully restore “self-consciousness, self-realization, self-respect.” The American world which had yielded him no true self-consciousness had let him see himself *only* through the eyes of the Other. Zamir says that what is true for DuBois is also true for Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre in his commentary on Hegel described this same phenomenon as being “The gaze of the ‘original fall’ that fixes the freedom of activity into passivity.” The appearance of the other is the disintegration of the self's world and a plunge into a state of vulnerability. By opening *Souls* when he is contemptuously rejected by the “glance” of the “tall newcomer” and forced into a new sense of self, DuBois, like Sartre, acknowledges that the disintegration of the self's world is also partly its negative structure or coherence. Zamir then quotes Sartre as saying,

Thus suddenly an object has appeared which has stolen the world from me. Everything is in place; everything still exists for me; but everything is traversed by an invisible flight and fixed in the direction of a new object. The appearance of the Other in the world corresponds therefore to a fixed sliding of the whole universe, to a decentralization of the world which undermines the centralization which I am simultaneously effecting.⁸

Thirty years after writing *Souls*, DuBois wrote an essay entitled “The Field and Function of the Negro College.” In this essay he was still addressing the issue of consciousness. He starts this essay by writing,

Once upon a time some four thousand miles east of this place, I saw the functioning of a perfect system of education. It was in West Africa... the education of the child began almost before it could walk. It went about with mother and father in their daily tasks; it learned the art of sowing and reaping and hunting; it absorbed the wisdom and folklore of the tribe; it knew the lay of the land and river. Then at the age of puberty it went into the bush and there for a season the boys were taught the secrets of sex and the girls in another school learned of motherhood and marriage. They came out of the bush with a ceremony of graduation, and immediately were given and taken in marriage.... They sat in council with their elders and learned the history and science and art of the tribe, and practiced all in their daily life. Thus education was completely integrated with life. There could be no uneducated people. There could be no education that was not at once for use in earning a living and for use in living a life.⁹

DuBois saw education as inextricably bound up with life, and to the extent that it failed to teach people how to live (morals/ethics/character), it was to that extent a failure for DuBois.

DUBOIS AS PHILOSOPHER

As a philosopher, it could be argued that DuBois was always pragmatic — taking from whatever tradition advanced his cause of freedom. For example, his empirical studies were clearly instrumentalist in nature, designed to gather data to support programmatic development and implementation. On the other hand, his historical studies, particularly Black Reconstruction, reveal a strong Marxist influence in using a class analysis for understanding forces of oppression. From pragmatism, particularly that of William James, DuBois sees agency and heroic energies at work in the black community through the use of creativity as a tool for freedom and liberation. Cornel West gives this description: “Like Emerson and other pragmatists, DuBois posits culture making as the prime instance of history making.... In good Emersonian fashion, DuBois’s democratic mores are grounded in the detection of human creative powers at the level of everyday life.”¹⁰ Through Hegel, DuBois sees consciousness becoming aware of itself as black people struggle against the consciousness of the oppressor reflected both in themselves and in their oppressors. However, unlike Hegel, DuBois would agree with Sartre and embrace existentialism insofar as it rejects determinism, accepts human alienation as a condition to be overcome, and embraces the use of choice in defining destiny and freedom. Knowledge would be the key instrument in determining and defining this destiny and freedom.

In the final analysis DuBois says that the Negro university must “expand toward the possession of all knowledge. It [must start] from a beginning of the history of the Negro in America and in Africa to interpret all history; [and ultimately]...interpret and understand the social development of all mankind in all ages.”¹¹

THE IMPORTANCE OF DUBOIS’S PHILOSOPHY TODAY

In one of his major works, *The Souls of Black*, DuBois concentrates largely on the loss of the true or authentic self. In DuBois’s view, the gaining of this authentic self is a *sine qua non* for the freedom of African people. DuBois thus recognized as early as 1903, if not before, that a major and continuing legacy of slavery and oppression of the black community was a loss of identity reflected in a loss of culture and a loss of culture reflected in a loss of identity. The culture that black people came to acquire, in DuBois’s view, was not a true reflection of their authentic self — a self

that must be regained if authenticity is to be achieved. That self for DuBois, I believe, operated on two levels — the social/political level and the spiritual level. Education, for DuBois, was a key factor or tool to be used to address this problem. He felt that,

the university, if it is to be firm, must hark back to the original ideal of the bush school. It must train the [students] of a nation for life and for making a living. And if it does that, and insofar as it does it, it becomes the perfect expression of the life and the center of the intellectual and cultural expression of its age.¹²

Applying this to today's society, I believe that DuBois would say that education, as it is currently structured, is too overcommitted to economic success and too undercommitted to character development and moral/ethnic and spiritual life. He recognized that the purposes of ancient education (particularly in precolonial Africa and other precolonial indigenous societies) were to create authentic humans beings who secondarily mastered the skills for living a life. He believed that if we are able to learn the lessons of these ancient societies, by striking a balance between economic goals and moral/ethical purposes, then we can eliminate most of the problems that we face today.

1. Louis Massiah, *W.E.B. DuBois: A Biography in Four Voices* (San Francisco: California Newsreel, 1995).

2. David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. DuBois: Biography of A Race 1868-1919* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1993), 93-95.

3. *Ibid.*, 95.

4. Shamooin Samir, *Dark Voices: W.E.B. DuBois and American Thought, 1888-1903* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 130.

5. W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Greenwich: Fawcett Publications, Inc. 1961), 16.

6. *Ibid.*, 16-17.

7. *Ibid.*, 20.

8. Zamir, *Dark Voices*, 140.

9. Herbert Aptheker, ed., *The Education of Black People: Ten Critiques, 1906-1960* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), 84.

10. Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 144.

11. Aptheker, *Education of Black People*, 95.

12. *Ibid.*, 88.