

The Intellectual, Moral, and Aesthetic Dimensions of W.E.B. Du Bois's Educational Philosophy

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In "Poetically Dwelling with the Veil," Rodino Anderson explores W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of the Veil within his educational philosophy. But in order to do so, he gives attention to how the veil undergirds Du Bois's intellectual, moral, and aesthetic ideas, which are the basis of his educational philosophy. Anderson establishes that the Veil is a categorical analogy, a "thought thing" and, as such, "resembles a category in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*." In brief, Kant's idea is that concepts of the mind, or categories of understanding within the subject or self, bring form to our otherwise unstructured sensory perception. So for Kant, human experience is a synthesis between "understanding" and "sensibility," which is a necessary condition of knowledge. A basic feature of human experience is the production and creation of knowledge, whether aesthetic, moral, or intellectual.

For Anderson, the Veil is an "intellectual construct" (a thought-thing) that gives structure to the immediate perceptions of the "Negro." Says Anderson, "the veil is a reality of experience, so long as a connection of perception subsists. That is, the Veil as an intellectual construct is present because, for Du Bois, the Negro finds himself always mitigating between seemingly diametrically opposed, simultaneous forces of perception." From this point, Anderson quotes Du Bois: "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."¹ What Anderson rightly perceives is that the Veil is suggestive of a different path toward self-formation for the Negro because of the problem of the color-line.

Contrast, for example, Kant's unified conception of the self with that of Du Bois's aforementioned description of the "African American." For Kant, "The fact that man is aware of an ego-concept raises him infinitely above all other creatures living on earth. Because of this, he is a person; and by virtue of this oneness of consciousness, he remains one and the same person despite all the vicissitudes, which may befall him."² But why is Du Bois compelled to put forward an explanation regarding the distinctiveness of African American self-formation? One answer is that Du Bois was responding to the ontological content of racist epistemologies, or beliefs, that suggested that African Americans as "black people" were not capable of a self or ego-concept. Which meant that blacks were no different from animals. According to Kant, aware of an ego concept "[European man] is a being who, by reason of his preeminence and dignity, is wholly different from things, such as the irrational animals whom he can master and rule at will."³

BILDUNG AND THE CULTIVATION OF HUMANITY

Why would Du Bois imply a notion of education as *bildung* as suggested by Anderson? If we look at its etymological relationship to the word education, this

might provide some initial insight. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “education” is from the Latin *e-ducare*: to bring out, draw forth; and *e-ducere*: to lead out. Its double etymology suggests both drawing something out of the learner, and leading the learner to a new place; erudite: taking someone or something out of a rude or crude condition. Instruction comes from *in-struere*: to build into; hence, the German *bildung*: to shape, form, and cultivate. The German *erziehen* gives: to bring up or train. Related to this and fundamental to modernity, is the belief that European man is capable of cultivating a self, or ego, and thus is able to transform his animal nature into human nature, and into a moral being. Education is the means through which this transformation occurs. As Kant explains, “Man is the only being who needs education. [Education] changes animal nature into human nature. [Education] prevents man from being turned aside by his animal impulses from humanity, his appointed end. Man can only become [human] by education.”²⁴ Thus, the etymology of *bildung* suggests that human is something we become through education, human is something that is cultivated within the context of producing and reproducing social life, or civilization.

MODERNITY AND DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS

Du Bois’s understated use of the notion *bildung* must be understood within the wider context of modernity. The Veil is Du Bois’s way of theoretically formulating a distinctively African American experience of modernity, if you will a “black modernity.” In a sense, then, for Du Bois, what distinguishes African Americans from other “cultural groups” is a double-consciousness. In the *Souls of Black Folks*, Du Bois provides three interrelated but different notions of double consciousness. The first is a third person consciousness in which “one looks at one’s self through the eyes of others or measures one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. This double consciousness is characterized by self-deception; in other words, by a false understanding or interpretation of self and life, diminishing the possibility of authentic self-presentation. The second sense of double consciousness, which predominates, gives way to self-doubt because it is characterized by what Du Bois calls, “the contradiction of double aims.” In this case, double consciousness produces disorientation, competing ideals, and irreconcilable strivings. The third sense of double consciousness represents for Du Bois what he calls “the merging of [an African American’s] double self into a better and truer self.” This is a “true self-consciousness” that enables African American forms of life to carry their “message” or cultural contribution to the world. That is to say, it enables African Americans to take part in the project of civilization.

CIVILIZATION AND PROGRESS

Throughout Du Bois’s early work, he was preoccupied with the categories “race,” “civilization,” and “progress.” It is important to point out that these eighteenth century, or Enlightenment, categories were integral to the philosophical vocabulary of modernity — a vocabulary that categorized African descended people as perpetual “savages,” not fully human, incapable of social life and culture, and unable to achieve and contribute to human civilization and human progress. Illustrative of this idea is the antiblack sentiment expressed by Henry Ward Beecher,

a contemporary of Du Bois, regarding the insignificance and worthlessness of Africana peoples:

Were Africa and the Africans to sink to-morrow, how much poorer would the world be? A little less gold and ivory, a little less coffee, a considerable ripple, perhaps, where the Atlantic and Indian Oceans would come together — that is all; not a poem, not an invention, not a piece of art would be missed from the world.⁵

Du Bois's response in his early works to this widely held antiblack sentiment is consistent with his African American contemporaries. One of those contemporaries was Anna Cooper, who asked the following question: "What are we worth? [What] do we represent to the world? What is our market value? Are we a positive and additive quantity or a negative factor in the world's elements?" Cooper believed that the best way to respond to this question is for African Americans individually and collectively to contribute to "those things the world prizes" — in short, civilization and progress.⁶

Anderson thoughtfully shows us in his reading of the *Souls of Black Folks* how Du Bois's "complex conception of the Veil" provided a way for understanding not only the aesthetic, moral, and intellectual dimensions of his educational philosophy, but its imaginative or poetic power. The Veil is imaginatively interpreted by Du Bois as the source for African American self-reflection and self-creation, in other words, the source of black freedom, the basis for an African American modernity.

One significant oversight by Anderson is that his essay focuses on Du Bois's answer and not the questions he was responding to. That is, Du Bois was writing within an intellectual environment and popular culture that doubted the existence of African Americans as human beings. This was a context that evaluated the humanity of a people in terms of their capacity to achieve and contribute to human progress and civilization. Du Bois's attraction to Kant and Hegel, and the concept of *bildung*, is motivated out of his need to formulate answers to questions that challenged the worth and significance of "black people" of African descent. Kant and Hegel may be implied in Du Bois's thinking, but they are not the source for his motivation. The poetic significance of the Veil as a distinct mode of African American self-consciousness is such that Du Bois sees African Americans as having a distinctive path to achieving civilization and progress. Thus, Du Bois challenges the anti-black racism that under girds the unitary view of human change and evolution held by philosophers like Kant and Hegel, and by Du Bois's European and European-American intellectual contemporaries.

1. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover Publications, 1994), 2.

2. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 9.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, 10.

5. Amy Cooper, *Voices* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1998), 160.

6. *Ibid.*, 165, 166.