ON DU BOIS’ NOTION OF DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS

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Abstract: The recent reception of Du Bois’ notion of “double consciousness” in the humanities has affirmed the notion as crucial and pivotal throughout his work. In contrast, its recent reception in the social sciences has tended to reject its centrality and importance. This essay will give general credence to the former position but, more importantly, show why a turn to Rousseau’s conception of amour-propre may illuminate the importance of “double consciousness” in and for Du Bois’ 1903 work The Souls of Black Folk (SBF), despite the fact that he never elaborated on or embraced the notion in work subsequent to SBF’s publication.

I. Introduction

If there is any notion that defines or identifies W.E.B Du Bois, at least in the popular mind, it is the notion of “double consciousness” presented in his The Souls of Black Folk (SBF). It is usually characterized as a kind of socio-psychological and, sometimes, socio-historical disposition of African Americans specifically or people of color generally to their aims and goals as shaped by the social barrier of racial segregation and colonization. Du Bois refers to this barrier as “the Veil.” It signifies the ubiquitous and pervasive impediment, on racially segregated grounds, to both the fulfillment and the belief in the fulfillment of African American ideals and objectives. But it also signifies the concealment from white people’s comprehension the legacy and currency of African-American practices and forms of life as shaped by this racial hindrance – practices and forms of life reflective of material poverty, stifled ambitions, and diminished expectations on one side yet uncommon moral courage, melodious eloquence and expression, and irrepressible religious faith on the other. Generally speaking, “double consciousness” for Du Bois is taken as a conflicted psychological disposition or state of mind of African Americans as a whole to their aims, pursuits, and fulfillment of them in light of “the Veil,” yielding a broad-based African American cultural dilemma.

However, this characterization of “double consciousness,” according to recent social science literature, cannot be defended as having causal significance. “Double consciousness” does not serve as a causal explanation for black people being psychologically conflicted in believing X or in doing Y in light
of “the Veil.” As a consequence, this literature denies that “double consciousness” is pivotal to either Du Bois’ thought or the identity of blacks as a whole.¹

For example, the sociologist Lawrence Bobo emphasizes that Du Bois was first and foremost an empirical social scientist and that his analytic concern was focused not on “double consciousness,” but on “racial prejudice and racial attitudes in lockstep with the economic interests and ambitions of working-class whites.”² The dynamics of racial prejudice and racial attitudes explained “the depression of the most talented as well as the alienation of the most marginal within the black community.”³ For Bobo, then, “double consciousness” is inconsequential.

The historian Ernest Allen believes that “double consciousness” is equivocal and fuzzy, having no empirical evidence to support it. But, he contends, it is a tactic, Du Bois’ “double sleight of hand.”⁴ It is a legerdemain identifying the specific anxiety of black elites over the ridicule of their talents by whites in general as a wholesale anxiety prevalent among blacks in general, but concealing a purpose. The concealed purpose was to allay the unease of black elites, even in the face of such ridicule, to the possible foreclosure of continued respect and patronage for their talents from white elites. For Allen, then, “double consciousness” is a gambit.

Finally the political scientist Adolph Reed argues that “double consciousness” is the result of the “intellectual and political conventions” of its time, i.e., “neo-Lamarckian social science and the discourse of ‘alienage’ and ‘twoness’ prominent among fin-de-siècle American intellectuals.”⁵ Its intellectual and political relevance and validity extend neither retrospectively nor prospectively elsewhere or beyond its own time. Reed’s historicism enables him to embrace “double consciousness” as the outcome of the “problematiques” of an era. But it does not enable him to embrace “double consciousness” as either the

¹ A representative list of social scientific literature supporting, explicitly or implicitly, the marginality of “double consciousness” in Du Bois’ thought would be Ernest Allen (2002), Lawrence Bobo (2000), and Adolph Reed (1997).


³ Ibid., pp. 189 & 192.


⁵ Adolph Reed, W.E.B. Du Bois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 120.
“key organizing principle of [Du Bois’] thought in general or a generic racial condition whereby millions of individuals experience a peculiar form of bifurcated identity simply by virtue of racial status.” \(^6\) For Reed, “double consciousness” is a historically contingent idea.

Contrary to the social science literature, Du Bois’ conception of “double consciousness” in the humanities literature, is regarded as if it were the point d’appui of his thought and as if it were the knotty cultural trait of all African Americans.\(^7\) Generally, in this literature, it is defended as irreplacably conveying a ‘pre- and a re-understanding’ of the meaning through which black people take up what ought to be done or ought to be believed, given “the Veil.” Broadly speaking, then, “double consciousness” would not typify, with causal implications, black people as unequivocally being in psychologically conflicted states of mind concerning racial matters. It would rather typify, with a sense of understanding, black people as problematically responding to scenarios with racially contested expectations.

To both make sense and affirm the notion’s content and its centrality, I want to examine briefly, but with some concision, Du Bois’ conception of “double consciousness” as it is developed in the opening chapter of SBF – “Of Our Spiritual Strivings.”\(^8\) The examination will show, through Rousseau, what is involved in the notion’s content and hopefully provide a reason for its centrality to Du Bois’ work. Currently the best detailed examination of Du Bois notion of “double consciousness” can be found in Robert-Gooding Williams’ excellent book In the Shadow of Du Bois.\(^9\) I will both make use of and criticize it to help my examination along, but not deny it as a worthy interpretation of “double consciousness.” If successful, an alternative way of understanding Du Bois’ notion will have been presented. I will then examine briefly, but with some sketchiness, the humanities literature on Du Bois’ notion to address some of its weaknesses.

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\(^6\) Ibid., pp. 123, 124, & 125.

\(^7\) A representative, but far from exhaustive, list of the humanities-literature work supporting the centrality of “double consciousness” in Du Bois’ thought would be Lawrie Balfour (1998; 2011), Dickson B. Bruce (1992), Paul Gilroy (1993), Robert Gooding-Williams (2010), and Shamoon Zamir (1995).

\(^8\) For Du Bois, the notion appears earlier in his 1897 essay in The Atlantic Monthly entitled “Strivings of Negro People,” which is amended to some extent and republished as “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” serving as the first chapter of SBF.

II. Du Bois’ The Souls of Black Folk (SBF) and “Double Consciousness”

For Du Bois, “double consciousness” arises, first of all, from what is raised in “The Forethought” of SBF – “the strange meaning of being black.” The “strange meaning” of having a specific racial identity, “of being black,” has little to do with the oddness of what the meaning of being black picks out or not (its referential capacity) or with the peculiarity of what the meaning of being black puts across clearly and distinctly or not (its ideational capacity). Rather it has much to do with the strangeness the meaning acquires when black people participate in a certain socio-cultural context but do not simply represent it in that context. And, for Du Bois, this signifies that the strangeness of its meaning is connected with “the spiritual world [wherein] ten thousand thousand Americans live and strive,” and neither exclusively nor primarily connected with the capacity of Americans to say or represent what is or is not the case about being black.

As one can see, this strangeness issue is not just a matter for the few. Furthermore it operates in conjunction with the strivings of blacks. Philosophically strivings are peculiar items to analyze. They are, first, tendencies of subjects toward determining their objects in the sense of reaching or accomplishing goals. Secondly, their aim presupposes two things: (a) the subject’s initially wholesale independence from its object or goal, tangible or intangible, and (b) the determination of the object or reaching the goal as entirely dependent on the subject. Hence, what the subject aims for is the compliance and convergence of the object or goal with the subject’s strivings or determinations. And what the subject aims for, what it strives towards, is conducted for the sake of the subject’s own esteem. But the subject can accommodate the point that it can never achieve the goal, that it cannot render wholesale an object’s compliance to the subject’s strivings. Strivings then can never be construed as facts about subjects, but only as demands subjects make upon themselves and their world for the acquisition of esteem from others.

It is important to keep this point in mind when addressing “double consciousness” as a matter of “our [black people’s] spiritual strivings.” How do black people strive or conduct themselves in the face of the long-lasting and seemingly ongoing usefulness of the color line as the impediment to both proffering their demands and pursuing their goals freely, individually and collectively? Du Bois, however, never refers to “double consciousness” explicitly as a response to this question. Rather he refers to it explicitly

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11 Ibid.
as a “peculiar sensation,” not in the sense of being something extraordinary or a sense-datum, but in the sense of being sentient, being sensibly aware or conscious of one’s surroundings and of one’s self and its inclinations and strivings. Gooding-Williams rightly states, I believe, that, as a sensation, “double consciousness” is a “kind of feeling,” which addresses, according to him, the question black people, Du Bois contends, frequently intimate to themselves – “How does it feel to be a problem?” – a question rarely answered.

This would suggest that “double consciousness” as a “kind of feeling” is a feeling of discontent concerning (a) one’s estimation of the displeasure of the sensation of being a problem produced by one’s encounter with something or someone and (b) one’s comparison of the displeasure of this sensation so produced either with reflection or from others’ estimation. Gooding-Williams’ assessment seems to address (a) but not (b). Du Bois too seems hard pressed to show how “double consciousness” as a “kind of feeling” intimates (b). To address this point requires looking at another statement Du Bois makes regarding “double consciousness,” whose implications Du Bois neglects to draw out.

Du Bois refers to “double consciousness” as “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” or as belonging to “a world yielding him no true self-consciousness, but only letting him see himself through the revelation of the other world.” Here Du Bois makes (b) prominent, and it is the comparative character of (b) that contributes to making “peculiar” the sensation or “kind of feeling” “double consciousness” is and to making “strange” the very sense of being black. But he did not know or was derelict to mention how close his comment was to a few of the maladies belonging to what Jean-Jacques Rousseau called “amour-propre.” Clearly his interpreters, social scientists and humanists, have not considered it.

Briefly and sketchily argued, amour-propre or self-love is the socially plastic sentiment of striving for esteem, worth, or value to be “measured” and confirmed by the opinions of others, and whose

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12 Ibid., p. 38.
15 Ibid., p. 38.
16 Although Du Bois refers to “eighteenth-century Rousseauism” in the previously mentioned 1897 essay “Strivings of the Negro People” in The Atlantic Monthly, his reference to Rousseau there is less use than mention.
maladies consist in the comparative measure by others when they deny or mitigate (1) a person’s equality with others, (2) a person’s integrity, (3) a person’s esteem relying on the actual matters others’ opinions are expected to echo, and (4) a person’s reasonable evaluation of one’s own merits. For Rousseau, *amour-propre* and its maladies are the artifice of “sociable man, capable of living only in the opinion of others; and, so to speak, deriving the sentiment of his own existence solely from their judgment.” He goes further maintaining that sociable man is “forever asking of others what we are, without daring to ask it ourselves...we have nothing more than a deceiving and frivolous exterior, honor without virtue, reason without wisdom, and pleasure without happiness.” How is Du Bois’ conception of “double consciousness” different from Rousseau’s conception of *amour-propre* and its maladies?

*Amour-propre* entails the striving for esteem; that the esteem striven for can be established only comparatively, i.e., only in relation to the esteem bestowed on one by others; and that the esteem sought can be measured on par with others only through the eyes and opinions of others. There is nothing wrong per se with any of these facets since, generally speaking, one sees oneself in others. However, *amour-propre*’s maladies entail a malignant propensity to fuel with passionate intensity the incentive for forms of inequality, even with institutional support, since the esteem sought in relation to others would be measured by others taking themselves superior to them. This leads one to overestimate, underestimate, or deny one’s sense of worth, not only as a person or group supposedly worthy of respect but, just as important, to overestimate, underestimate, or deny the worthiness of a person’s or group’s accomplishments, endowments, gifts, or message. In the context of the color line, the maladies of *amour-propre* would fuel the overestimated belief of lighter races that the natural determination of the lightness of their skin color was an accomplishment or was the explanatory source for any and all accomplishments to be had exclusively by such races for the sake of superior repute.

However, whereas Rousseau tends to investigate the inflation of *amour-propre* in those who overestimate the worth or value of their strivings and/or underestimate or deny the worth of the strivings of others, Du Bois focuses on those exposed to the inflamed *amour-propre* of others. In being so exposed,


19 *Amour-propre* does not constitute or produce the color line and its institutions. But once the color line is on the scene, *amour-propre* provides it with the stimulus to spread widely and intensely forms of inequality over and above what nature could produce and society could anticipate.)
those (of the darker races) have their own respect and esteem as well as their accomplishments denied or underestimated by others (of the lighter races), thereby agitating and worsening the color line. In short, Du Bois’ notion of “double consciousness” is the general outcome to the maladies of *amour-propre* on those (of darker races), denying or underestimating their (1) striving for equality with others, (2) their integrity, (3) their reliance on actual accomplishments as the basis for deserving commensurate or higher esteem from others, and (4) their ability to evaluate their own merits reasonably. Still those of darker races require the comparison in order to sustain these 4 points and be measured on par and commensurate with others or be measured as better or worse *without* the detraction from others and their concomitant ascendency.

Indeed the very sense of being black in the eyes of others is at stake in the comparison. But it also involves a comparison gone awry, since the comparison has fostered in others a feeling of or a need for supremacy through social relations of domination derisive of others. And, for Du Bois, this comparison gone awry is a matter about which black people are, at least, sentient, awake to, even if they have not grasped it conceptually. This is consistent with the idea that “double consciousness” is not just black people’s sentence to being a problem but, more importantly I believe, *their sentence to the comparison by which they are made a problem*.

By being sentient in this fashion, black people *either* hold in abeyance their own ideals, norms, and thoughts in order to act in accordance with others’ ideals, sentiments, and thoughts or attend so much to how others regard them, even in spite of definite accomplishments of their own, that they take *seeming* to be admirable in the face of others’ estimation to be as advantageous as actually *being* admirable in others’ proper estimation. In these circumstances, a black person’s striving to be for others could rest on the manner in which s/he *seems* to be accepted rather than on the manner in which s/he *is* accepted, not in the sense of being who s/he *essentially* is, but in the sense of not being estranged from herself. S/he thus would not only succumb to the underestimation of white others, but also to a self-estrangement s/he herself generates, in response to this underestimation, to appear other than s/he truly appears to others on either side of the color line. Black people have been awake to these temperaments as well, and these are why Du Bois has taken the very sense of being black in the eyes of others as “strange,” a charitable description if one thinks about it.
Each temperament is expressive of what has been called “double consciousness” as “dualist/duelist” (i.e., being of two conflicting minds) and as “duplicitous” (i.e., being two-faced). Regarding the former, “double consciousness” would engage in less a logical than a performative “contradiction of double aims” wherein, say, one’s norms are at odds with the implications of acting in line with the norms of others or the converse. Representative of this, say, frame of mind, would be Booker T. Washington. His support for the norm of self-respect among black people would conflict with his strong recommendation for quiet acquiescence to, not rousing advocacy against, the downgrading of their rights as citizens. In effect, his claim affirming the norm of self-respect would be at odds with his obligation to possible actions justifying the affirmative of his claim. Being of two conflicting minds can also lead straightaway to self-doubt.

Regarding the latter, “double consciousness” would involve pretense and hypocrisy as useful approaches to the acquisition of esteem. Representative of this frame of mind can be found in Du Bois’ discussion of the black artist and doctor in “Of Our Spiritual Strivings.” For the artist, “the soul-beauty of a race” made manifest to and by her was a beauty despised by her large [white] audience whose estimation she accepted, but could not articulate to those of her race. For the doctor, “the ignorance and poverty of her people” inveigled her toward quackery and, by virtue of criticism from the [white] world, toward norms that shamed her of her less than exalted tasks. In both cases, “wooing false gods and invoking false means of salvation” were their way out of the dualist/duelist mode of “double consciousness,” but now their way into its duplicitous expression. In effect, both the black artist and doctor not only seek to appear praiseworthy and respectable before others but, more importantly, to convince themselves of the deceitful apparitions with which they have populated both worlds for the sake of their praiseworthiness and respectability. Being two-faced can also lead straightaway to self-deception.

Du Bois, however, does hint at another way out, a “longing,” evident in the history of black people, “to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self.” Although most tend to consider this merger as the elimination of “double consciousness” and the emergence of a “synthetic” self, so to speak, as now both “American” and “Negro” unified, it is unclear

22 Ibid., p. 40.
23 Ibid., p. 39.
what Du Bois has in mind here. I would hazard the guess that Du Bois’ claim here refers not to the elimination of “double consciousness,” but to its emergence as “dyadic.” He also rather vaguely connects this emergent or “dyadic” double consciousness, this merging of selves, so to speak, to the “rending of the Veil,” portrayed as a far-off event and on the premise of the conditional existence of an “Eternal Good.”

This far-off event, consisting of the “Veil’s” rending and the merging of selves, has a history of being longed for, a longing musically expressed, and its music delineated in the final chapter of *SBF*, “The Sorrow Songs.” But, if my assessment so far has been on point, it would also require not the elimination of “double consciousness,” but the avoidance, if not elimination, of the maladies of *amour-propre* on “double consciousness.” As “double consciousness,” the “dyadic” mode too would be sentient to the comparison by which it is made a problem. Its so-called “merger,” however, alludes to something by which the other 2 modes are not characterized. Repairing to Rousseau will help here by considering his remedy for *amour-propre*’s maladies.

In *SBF*, Du Bois does, like Rousseau, insist on a certain kind of education. But it is an education for black people, whose formative measures involve not only teaching and learning at either well-furnished colleges/universities or schools connected to them, but simultaneously curbing the harmful makings of the comparative measures on the character and esteem of the so-called educated or “college-bred Negro.” As we know, education is, for Rousseau, the remedy to the maladies of *amour-propre*; for Du Bois, the “dyadic” mode of “double consciousness” would be the supposed outcome of education in the context of *SBF*. The “dyadic” mode would reflect, via education, the result of an individual coming to a true, non-estranged comprehension of the position s/he deserves in comparison to others as both a citizen and a person of color with certain talents and competences. In this mode, the strivings for

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24 Frank M. Kirkland, *op. cit.*, p. 151. I choose Kirkland’s term “dyadic” rather than “synthetic,” because I take Du Bois here to be endorsing a negotiated pairing, through the proper education, between citizen and person of color rather than an amalgamation of both or two forms of life.


27 See my “Rousseau’s Place in Du Bois’ Assessment of Brown v. Board of Education,” a PowerPoint presentation in a symposium with David Levering Lewis to the Yonkers chapter of the NAACP celebrating Du Bois’ 144th birthday, 23 February 2012.
excellence of a person of color would simultaneously be moderated by a vigorous sentiment of the moral equality of all human beings.  

Unlike Rousseau, Du Bois does not, despite desires to the contrary, insist on, with any detail in *SBF*, social transformation of extant political institutions to eliminate such maladies. As stated previously, *amour-propre* relies fundamentally on the opinions of others for their estimations on one’s own esteem and worth. But the pernicious and capricious overestimations, underestimations, and denials arising from it as well as their insidious effects, both materially and spiritually, on black people were allowed to flourish without constraint by political institutions during Du Bois’ times. Since political institutions had not, in Du Bois’ mind, curbed them, education, he believed then, was the safeguard against them.

This is why the person of color reflective of the “dyadic” mode of “double consciousness is, for Du Bois, not one realized politically, but longed for historically and shaped educationally with that history of the longing in mind. S/he seeks to redeem this history as her own for the purpose of remembering the kindred-minded others before her, who were sentient to the comparison by which they were made the problem and whose form of life, freedom, and happiness were foreclosed to them. S/he seeks to redeem it as well for the purpose of making that history serve as an ongoing motive for her and kindred-minded others to be mindful of (a) the price of freedom and promised satisfaction and (b) the burden of never letting that history sink to a matter of indifference, ignorance, or detraction.

III. Reception of Du Bois “Double Consciousness” in the Humanities

“Double consciousness” as the object of critique in the social science literature does not emerge in its humanities reception, especially in its reception in recent black literary theory and Africana philosophy. “Double consciousness” as simply an inconsequential matter, or a ploy, or a historically contingent phenomenon will not be defended in these areas of study. In recent literary theory, “double consciousness” usually takes one of two tracks. **Either** it marks a pursuit to uphold a culturally distinctive black **authenticity**, animating an inimitable black sensibility, in concord with, not in discord with, living a racially dual existence with ambivalence. **Or** it marks a “trope of dualism figured initially in

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28 I take this assessment to reflect the following claim from *SBF*: “…that, to attain his place in the world, he must be himself and not another.” *Ibid.*, p. 41. And although I cannot delve into the matter here, I would take the “merging” not as a synthesis of two forms of life – African and American – but as a taut pairing between person of color and citizen.
black discourse,” a rhetorical construct for the postulation of a black literary tradition or “canon” wherein “black” texts are, so to speak, “double-voiced,” i.e., doubly evoke black and white literary antecedents.

In philosophy, “double consciousness” takes a different spin, because discussion concerning Du Bois in philosophy turns more on his racialism than on “double consciousness.” Although the two are correlated, one can philosophically speak about Du Bois on race and identity without even mentioning “double consciousness,” but one cannot philosophically address “double consciousness” without, at least, an allusion to the race-concept. Still, on the philosophical scene, “double consciousness” was once presented as an independent truth maker or even fact about the African-American experience as a whole and indispensable to the framing of what had then been called “Afro-American philosophy.”

Recently the thinking around “double consciousness” has changed philosophically. It has been promulgated successfully in the realm of existential thought as a notion by which black people affectively relate themselves to their already impending existence. “Double consciousness” does not express their state of irresolution; it rather expresses their “feeling” of suffering as a lived reality, in which black people take themselves, both historically and currently, as the social problem of the modern world. It is not just historically contingent whose start and expiration dates present the elapsed time of the efficacy of its “intellectual and political problematiques.” It is rather historically efficacious, since the self-understanding of black people as well as the development of their experience are and will be ever intimate, in the form of tradition, with past racial burdens and racially alienating prospects of dissatisfaction.

But historicizing “double consciousness” can alter the existential focus. It can shift the focus primarily “from the difficulties arising from black internalization of an American identity, [from the difficulties arising from black feelings of suffering and comprising black peoples’ “being-in-the


30 A good example of this point is the work of Kwame Anthony Appiah or Bernard Boxill on Du Bois.


world.”]…to illuminating the experience of post-slave populations in general and animating a dream of global cooperation among peoples of color, which came to full fruition in his [Du Bois’] later work.”

Historicizing “double consciousness” expands the notion to cover the manners in which black people are both “inside and outside the West, [affecting] the conduct of [their] political movements against racial oppression and towards black autonomy.” Whereas a historically achieved satisfaction for black people, construed in terms of “double consciousness,” would be in the offing here, such a satisfaction, under existential auspices, would not.

Still it is important to grasp that the conception of “double consciousness,” construed in terms of the ills of Rousseau’s *amour-propre*, has not yet been found on the radar screen of the contemporary humanities literature. On the one hand, in recent African-American literary theory, the project, generally speaking, has been to remove black literature away from either the harsh and invidious racialized comparisons or the promotion of social justice, since either one would undermine its literary merit. Once the removal is made, black literary works would do two things. Firstly, it would reflect an aesthetically distinctive black sensibility through creative and critical implementation of both the musical and rhetorical forms of its vernacular expression. Secondly, it would stand in textual relations with so-called “Western” literary works, on which it playfully “modifies” the language and “literary imagination” of these works for the sake of its sensibility. “Double consciousness,” in short, becomes a black text’s trope of what is conveyed in and what is figuratively tempered by the black vernacular. Nothing detrimental emerges therefrom. However, if the removal were not made, given the theory, black literature would be too bound to its encounter with racial ideology and not bound to provisions that would make it literary and thus believed to be apart from this encounter. As a result, black literature would be complicit in its fabrication as political or sociological texts.


On the other hand, the notions of self-esteem and self-respect in relation to racism, enslavement, and social justice have been prominent in moral and political investigations throughout Africana philosophy, albeit not in the context of “double consciousness.”

For example, McGary indeed points to self-esteem’s comparative requirement and its reliance on the opinions of others, but he insists on a self-conception, i.e., self-respect, exempt from both this requirement and reliance while steadfastly attached to a person’s own due sense of worthiness as rightfully equal or on par with others. Hill fully affirms this view of self-respect, but admits to another conception of it which, unlike the former, relies on a capacity to live by a self-imposed dignity in a non-alienating way and independent of any concern from or about others. Boxill argues that self-esteem is acquired, independently of others’ opinions, by having self-respect or dignity, and manifestly so, but never the converse. Thomas is of the mind that self-respect is fragile, subject to a social context that can either underwrite or undermine it. If underwritten, self-respect is socially widespread. In the face of being undermined, however, he argues that self-respect can be strengthened by acts of supererogation insulating it from the actions and behaviors of others seeking to undermine it. Moody-Adams, like Thomas, recognizes that socialized attenuations in self-esteem can unravel self-respect, but she argues that, through education and policy, the social bases of self-respect can be refurbished to underwrite self-esteem.

There is one thing these inquiries share in common. They all avow the Kantian-inspired principle that self-respect takes precedence over self-esteem in moral import. Indeed some admit that the harm done to the self-esteem of blacks is itself menacing to the self-respect of blacks. Despite their differences, which unfortunately cannot be seriously tackled here, all of them ultimately find ways to stress the Kantian-informed subordination of self-esteem to self-respect via their concurrent belief that self-respect can lead to de-emphasis of the specific aspiration prompting endeavors or strivings to be esteemed.

37 Representatives of this line of inquiry are Bernard R. Boxill, Thomas E. Hill, Jr., Howard McGary, Michele Moody-Adams, and Laurence M. Thomas.


As I stated earlier, however, Du Bois’ “double consciousness” refers to a black person’s felt awareness of the harmfully comparative measures of others on her character and self-esteem, by which s/he takes herself to be a problem in and of a social arrangement permitting such measures or obliging them. To be sure, being regarded lowly by others carries repercussions of the dual/duel or duplicitous expectations s/he would have apropos their behavior to her. Still s/he seeks, in the first instance, right opinions on her character, not an expression or display of others’ commitment to behaving toward all persons equally as morally worthy.

Despite Du Bois’ appreciation of the significance of self-respect, as shown in his 1934 essay “Separation and Self-Respect,” his conception of “double consciousness,” under the auspice of *amour-propre*, neither aims at nor leads to a black person regarding her worth as equal to that of all others. Du Bois is not seeking, as a sufficient condition, some characteristic(s) persons of color share with all other persons to avert “double consciousness.” Moreover, in his eyes, self-respect alone cannot fulfill the (spiritual) strivings of a person on the disfavored side of the color line. It is quite likely that, in addressing the integrity of self-respect, discussion of “double consciousness” becomes irrelevant to that enterprise for the aforementioned philosophers.

Still “double consciousness” carries two elements. **First**, it represents the (duelist or duplicitous) hazards for a black person continually obtaining damaging sentiments to her way of life solely from the opinions of others. **Second**, it emphasizes, as a (dyadic) solution to the hazards, a black person undertaking a certain educational regimen toward a way of life that enables her flourishing and prevents harmfully racist sentiments from securing a grip on her character. For Du Bois, self-respect may well issue from the second point. However, for him, it may not by itself undo the emergence of “double consciousness” and its complexity stemming from the maladies of *amour-propre*.

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44 Although I cannot present the argument here, there appears to be a link between the educational element resonating in the dyadic conception of “double consciousness” in SBF and the same element raised to a level of importance in “Separation and Self-Respect.” This same educational element is intimated in Du Bois’ remarks in 1955 and 1956 about *Brown v. Board of Education*. See my “Rousseau’s Place in Du Bois’ Assessment of Brown v. Board of Education,” *op. cit.*
IV. Conclusion

I hope to have shown in this essay, with the help of Rousseau, that Du Bois’ notion of “double consciousness” turns less on the conflicted psychological disposition or existential anxiety over being black and/or American than on the perils to the aspirations of blacks for esteem and recognition. Since the perils are a permanent accompaniment to and often a realized possibility to the aspirations themselves, “double consciousness” is not simply reflective of an identity crisis amongst blacks. It is rather reflective of the stance of compromising one’s ideals to maintain one’s esteem that others perversely deny or underestimate for the sake of their ascendancy.

Being of two conflicting minds or being two-faced are the outcomes of the compromise to the hazards accompanying their aspirations for esteem. Unless the compromise is not made, “double consciousness” is either dualist/duelist or duplicitous. But since it is, the issue becomes the repair of the normative stance on which persons of color conduct their strivings and seek to fulfill their aspirations for esteem and recognition. This repair implies keeping in mind and now challenging the continuing perils of the ascendancy of others which accompany necessarily the aspirations and strivings of persons of color. The problems to be repaired are those the notion of “double consciousness” offers illumination as well as a promise for safeguarding against them, but never a resolution to them. This is why the notion cannot be presented as single or uniform, but as varied (3-fold in my case), something both social scientists and humanists on Du Bois miss.

Still, as the preeminent empirical social scientist of his day, Du Bois did not take too much stock in either the normative area or the normative enterprise for its renovation. He had focused his attention on systematic, value neutral attempts and procedures in gathering facts and collecting and analyzing data on the state of black people from which objectively relevant social reform on behalf of the improved social condition of blacks would issue. Even when he transferred his energies to political advocacy on behalf of persons of color, empirically social-scientific investigation served his activism. So the notion of “double consciousness” would not have the import for him, as the social science literature has maintained.

But Du Bois was an excellent interpretive social scientist as well. In SBF, he let go of the postulate of value neutrality and endorsed an idea – “double consciousness” now racialized and exposed to the maladies of amour-propre – making it central to the interpretive analysis of and historical approach to post-Reconstruction while, with fidelity, staying the course of producing some kind of objective account on the social condition of blacks. Although he dropped the term after 1903, that is not evidence
he dropped commitment to what the sense of the term conveyed or denied what was entitled to ensue from it. In this light, Du Bois ignited a new area of research in SBF, which others have continually and intensely followed and developed since. Hopefully this essay is well in keeping with the intellectual expansion and promotion of the topic.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


