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**Ethics in a World of Strangers: W.E.B. Du Bois
and the Spirit of Cosmopolitanism¹**

W.E.B. Du Bois's international reputation must strike us now, I think, as rather surprising. He starred in no films; though there is powerful newsreel footage of his angry denunciations of American racism and European colonialism. None of his novels was a best-seller; of all his writings, in fact, only *The Souls of Black Folk* was a real publishing success, with its twenty-four editions between 1903 and 1940, and even *The Souls* only sold some fifteen thousand copies in its first three decades on the publisher's list. Du Bois was never elected to public office; and when he did run, once, as the American Labor Party candidate for New York, he was 82 and got just four percent of the vote.

What made Du Bois famous was not the life he lived but the words he wrote; and his fame, outside Afro-America, was a fame among writers. William James – one of Du Bois's favorite undergraduate teachers – sent a copy of *The Souls of Black Folk* to his brother Henry calling it “decidedly moving.” (“Read Chapters VII to XI for local color,” William wrote, hoping, perhaps, to interest Henry in setting a few more episodes of his fictional work in their native country.) Henry James's response to the book William sent him was to call *The Souls of Black Folk* “the only ‘Southern’ book of any distinction published in many a year.” Not the most positive compliment you ever heard; but a compliment nevertheless from a critic with enormously high standards. More, perhaps, than any American, certainly more than any African-American before or since, Du Bois was famous *as* an intellectual and *as* a writer. The constant stream of poetry, drama, biography, fiction (long and short), monographs, letters, autobiographies, symposia, and newspaper and journal articles can seem frankly overwhelming. Herbert Aptheker, Du Bois's literary executor,

published an edition of Du Bois's work and his formidable correspondence that runs to some 50 volumes.

Not only did he write constantly in almost every genre, this remarkable author's credentials as a scholar were among the most distinguished of his generation. He began his undergraduate career at Fisk, because a black college was the right place for an African-American, however smart, especially one of modest means who depended for the cost of his education on the philanthropy of strangers. But his achievements there were impressive enough to allow him to take his Fisk BA to Harvard; and he earned a second bachelor's degree there, two years later in 1890, *cum laude*, and was chosen to give one of the four commencement orations. A year later he had a Harvard MA in history, working under the tutelage of Albert Bushnell Hart, one of the founding fathers of modern historical studies in the United States. James had suggested that philosophy would be a chancier academic career: but his philosophy teacher's pragmatist spirit informed all his later endeavors.

Du Bois went on to study here at the Friedrich Wilhelms University in Berlin, at the apex of a German academic system that had re-created the university by inventing modern graduate education. He worked with Wilhelm Dilthey; he listened to Max Weber and Heinrich von Treitschke; and he deepened his knowledge of the Hegelianism that he had learned from George Santayana at Harvard. When he could not raise the funds to complete the doctoral degree in Germany, he returned back to America and to Cambridge, Massachusetts. His doctoral degree was the first granted to an African-American by Harvard. This was one of Du Bois's many firsts. Two years earlier he had been appointed Professor of Classics at Wilberforce University – a black college in Ohio – at the age of twenty-six. By 1895, nearly three years before his thirtieth birthday, W.E.B. Du Bois had two bachelors' degrees, an MA and a PhD.

Du Bois's first book was his history thesis on the suppression of the African slave trade, which was also, as it happens, an-

other first: the first dissertation to be published in the Harvard Historical Monograph Series by anyone, black, white, yellow or brown. In 1896, the year he published this pioneering historical monograph spanning two centuries of Atlantic history, the author left his job as a classics professor at Wilberforce to begin a sociological study, at the University of Pennsylvania, of the African-American community of downtown Philadelphia. (Du Bois hadn't liked Wilberforce University much, but he had met and married Nina Gomer, a student there; so he could hardly regard those brief years in Ohio as wasted.) Three years later, Du Bois published his second book, *The Philadelphia Negro*, which is, arguably, another of those firsts: the first modern scientific sociological study of an American community. It was the author of the *Philadelphia Negro* that Max Weber was to come to visit.

By the time that *The Philadelphia Negro* appeared, however, Du Bois himself was no longer a Philadelphia Negro; he had become one of those Georgia Negroes, riding Jim Crow in Atlanta. He had taken a job as professor of history and economics at Atlanta University, one of the crop of Southern black colleges that sprang up in the years immediately after the Civil War. Founded in 1865 by the American Missionary Association, and supported by the Freedman's Bureau, by the turn of the century it was educating black teachers to meet the growing needs of the segregated schools of the South. The University of Pennsylvania, Benjamin Franklin's institution, was willing to harbor his research: but in the 1890's it could not offer a black man a job as a professor. Du Bois was to spend more than a decade in Atlanta, editing the Atlanta University Studies in the sociology of Afro-America, organizing conferences, teaching and conducting research; research that shows up in the detailed knowledge of the rural South displayed in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Atlanta University was where Du Bois lived out his professorial vocation.

And all the time he was writing. The preface of *The Souls of Black Folk* (with typical individuality he called it a "Forethought") is signed "Atlanta, GA, Feb 1, 1903," three weeks before this thir-

ty-fifth birthday. One imagines that on February 2nd he began (if he did not finish!) the next work.

When he wasn't writing or teaching or doing research, he was busy helping to found organizations of racial uplift: in 1897 he co-founded the American Negro Academy; in 1900 he attended the first Pan-African Conference in London; in 1905 he helped organize the opening conference of the Niagara movement, whose aim was both to ensure black voting rights and (above all) to oppose Booker T. Washington's accommodations with segregation. But these institutional efforts of Du Bois's were largely fugitive, as I have said. Pan-African Congresses trickled on through the century; the Academy was to last barely three decades; and the Niagara movement had four conferences and disbanded in 1910. That movement *did* pave the way, however, for the creation, in 1909, of the National Negro Committee which was to develop into the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

And it was the NAACP that took Du Bois back out of the South in 1910 to edit its official magazine, *The Crisis*, in New York City and to direct the organization's publications and research (though not before he had added a new genre to his vita, by publishing his impassioned biography of John Brown). He was 42, a professor with a curriculum vitae and a list of publications and awards unmatched among African-Americans and equaled by few white academics. Now this scholar in his prime had a national platform on which to speak for the Negro: and he did so there for the next quarter century, until he resigned in one of his famous fits of indignation in 1934, at an age at which most people would have been contemplating a peaceful retirement.

But Du Bois at his resignation had thirty productive years to go. He returned to Georgia to chair the sociology department at Atlanta University. Within the year he established his place as a major American social historian by publishing *Black Reconstruction*, which remains a most important statement on its subject. When he was forced to retire from Atlanta University in his mid-

seventies, he went on working, writing newspaper columns, starting the *Encyclopedia of the Negro*. In the years after the Second World War, like many progressive Americans, he campaigned for nuclear disarmament, chairing the Peace Information Center, and attracting, inevitably, the attention of McCarthyites in Washington. Tried and acquitted in his eighty-third year on charges of being an “unregistered foreign agent,” he was denied a passport by the State Department anyway; and so was unable to accept Kwame Nkrumah’s invitation to attend Ghanaian independence. Only as he entered his tenth decade did the Supreme Court finally rule in *Kent v. Dulles*, that denying American citizens the right to travel because of their political opinions was unconstitutional. Du Bois applied for a passport and promptly began a sort of triumphal world tour.

He went back to the University of Berlin, now re-named, of course, for Alexander and Wilhelm von Humboldt, its founders, and received an honorary degree here in the Senatssaal; he traveled in Europe on both sides of the Iron Curtain; met Khrushchev in Moscow, Mao and Chou En Lai in Peking. By the time he received Nkrumah’s invitation to come to Ghana in 1960, this time to celebrate not independence but the final separation from Britain as Ghana became a Republic, he was able to attend. A year later, in 1961, he moved to Ghana for good. And in 1963, the boy from Great Barrington, Massachusetts, denied a new U.S. passport by the American Embassy in Accra, became a citizen of that African nation. On the eve of the great March on Washington in August 1963, he sent a telegram of support to Martin Luther King Jr. and the marchers. Du Bois died that night, on August 27, 1963, five years short of a century old. The telegram of congratulation and the telegram announcing his death were both read to the vast crowds gathered on the Mall in Washington. Du Bois had always had an amazing flair for the dramatic. His state funeral in Accra was one of the great public events of the modern history of Ghana. No one, of course, came from the United States Embassy to represent the country of his birth.

This was the man who wrote *The Souls of Black Folk*. And what a paradoxical figure he is. He wrote of his first trip to Africa that he saw “less of sexual dalliance” in a place where women were “usually naked to the waist – with bare bosom and limbs” than he saw every day on Fifth Avenue²; but he was so taken with Victorian middle-class formality, that someone once suggested, only partly in jest, that his wife probably called him Dr. Du Bois even in bed. (I once heard a well-known scholar wonder aloud whether the great man slept in that famous three-piece suit.) He was an elitist and a dandy, who developed the notion that the African-American community should be led by what he called a “talented tenth.” But he was also a Socialist in the 1930’s and he became a member of the Communist party in Ghana when he was more than ninety years old... without ever ceasing to be either a dandy or an elitist. He was profoundly committed to literature, poetry, art and music, writing movingly in *Dusk of Dawn* of coming to know Beethoven and Wagner, Titian and Rembrandt when he came to Europe³, and declaring that “art is not simply works of art; it is the spirit that knows Beauty, that has music in its soul and the color of sunsets in its headkerchiefs; that can dance on a flaming world and make the world dance, too.”⁴ But he also announced that “all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of purists.”⁵ He wrote that his people were “Americans, not only by birth and by citizenship, but by our political ideals, our language, our religion”; but he claimed membership, too, in a black race that transcended nationalities.⁶ And, in the end, his love of race and disappointment with America led him to renounce his American citizenship and take up with the new nation of Ghana.

In disentangling at least some of these paradoxes, one often finds in Du Bois echoes of his deep immersion in the philosophical traditions that shaped the German world of the late nineteenth century. Ross Posnock has managed to show, at least to my satisfaction, that Du Bois’s many pronouncements on art and propaganda can, in the end, be reconciled once one understands their German roots. When Du Bois claims that art is propaganda, Posnock argues, it is because, like Schiller, his vision of a “free life” entailed

living in an “aesthetic state.”⁷ Schiller’s account of the aesthetic was developed in terms of a philosophically sophisticated notion of what he called “bloßes Spiel,” *mere play*, which it would take too long to explore now. But, this much said, we all know that Schiller took the aesthetic to be central to every life; as when he wrote in the fifteenth of his *Letters On The Aesthetic Education of Man* that:

Man wird niemals irren, wenn man das Schönheitsideal eines Menschen auf dem nämlichen Weg sucht, auf dem er seinen Spieltrieb befriedigt...

Denn, um es endlich auf einmal herauszusagen, der Mensch spielt nur, wo er in voller Bedeutung des Worts Mensch ist, und er ist nur da ganz Mensch, wo er spielt.⁸

Posnock writes: “To this [...] conception of art as the practice that creates ‘Beauty of Truth and Freedom’ Du Bois gives the name ‘propaganda.’” And he quotes Du Bois: “I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care for any art that is not used for propaganda.” “This defamiliarized propaganda,” Posnock concludes “is the aesthetic unconfined to artifacts and become the practice of the art of living. Embodied in the ‘higher individualism,’ this practice commences ‘the creation of Beauty’ as an alternative to the philistinism that is coarsening American life.”⁹

To put the matter no doubt too simply: for Du Bois art is so central and necessary to the life well-lived that making it available to people – especially to those who have been deprived both of the experience of art and of the freedom to create it – is always an act of politics. Here, in placing the aesthetic at the heart of life, there could be no clearer expression of the debt that Du Bois – whose favorite poet was Goethe – owed to a German tradition that stretched back to the 1770’s and 80’s and the *Sturm und Drang*.¹⁰

I want to suggest today how a similar exploration of German sources helps illuminate the most-often quoted sentence in *The Souls of Black Folk*, the one that begins the second essay, “Of the Dawn of Freedom”: “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line, – the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea.”¹¹ Du Bois first offered this formulation in his speech “To the Nations of the World” at the first Pan-African Conference, organized by the Trinidadian Henry Sylvester Williams in London in 1900. Not one to waste a good line, Du Bois used it in the first paragraph of the “Forethought” of *Souls*, as well; this time, though, without the explanatory gloss. In his first use of this resonant formula at the Pan-African Congress, in the context of a discussion of the exploitation of the non-white world by European empires, Du Bois had said this:

The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line, the question as to how far differences of race – which show themselves chiefly in the color of the skin and the texture of the hair – will hereafter be made the basis of denying to over half the world the right of sharing to their utmost ability the opportunities and privileges of modern civilization.

And he went on to add:

The modern world must remember that in this age, when the ends of the world are being brought so near together, the millions of black men in Africa, America and the Islands of the Sea, not to speak of the brown and yellow myriads elsewhere, are bound to have a great influence upon the world in the future, by reason of sheer numbers and physical contact. If now the world of culture bends itself towards giving Negroes and other dark men the largest and broadest opportunity for education and self-development, then this contact and influence is bound to have a beneficial effect upon the world and hasten progress. But if, by reason of carelessness, prejudice, greed and injustice, the black world

is to be exploited and ravished and degraded, the results must be deplorable, if not fatal – not simply to them, but to the high ideals of justice, freedom and culture which a thousand years of Christian civilization have held before Europe.¹²

This context is hugely important. *The Souls* is about black life in America: but when he prefaces this discussion of Reconstruction in the American South with a remark about the place of black people not in America, but in the world; and when he insists, in the first essay, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” that “Negro blood” has a message not just for America but (again) “for the world,”¹³ Du Bois displayed tendencies absolutely fundamental to all his thinking. It is these tendencies, rooted deeply in the intellectual legacy of German culture that I want to explore.

Let us begin with the passage, on the second page of *The Souls*, where he places the Negro in a global context. “After the Egyptian and the Indian,” Du Bois writes, “the Greek and the Roman, the Teuton and the Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son.” *The Souls* was meant for precisely the wide readership it eventually received. Du Bois knew that he could not take the American general public through an academic discussion of what he meant by “race.” He knew that he lived in a world that largely took it entirely for granted that God or science had determined that human kind was composed of races: that white Americans were of one race, Negroes another, Chinese and Japanese, a third. But if we’re to understand how he himself was thinking about these things, we can turn back to the discussion of these very issues that he had prepared only a few years earlier when he gave a talk on “The Conservation of Races” at the second meeting of the American Negro Academy, which was published as the second of the Academy’s Occasional Papers in 1897. Since this essay was only slightly revised from the version he published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in August of 1897, and “The Conservation of Races” was delivered in March of the same year, they are, as Thomas Holt has pointed out, products of the same period of Du Bois’s thought.¹⁴ Still, they were, as I say, addressed to very dif-

ferent audiences: “The Conservation of Races” was addressed to the leading African-American intellectuals in a private meeting; *The Souls* was addressed very publicly to “knightly America”; it speaks in a black voice to a white audience. Du Bois’s style in *The Conservation of Races* is as florid as usual but he avoids some of the poetry of *The Souls*; and so we can see a little more clearly some of the assumptions at work.

“The question, [...] we must seriously consider,” Du Bois argues, “is this: What is the real meaning of Race.” And he answers, first, that, “[t]he final word of science, so far, is that we have at least two, perhaps three, great families of human beings – the whites and Negroes, possibly the yellow race.”¹⁵ What matters about these races that science has discerned, however, is not the “gross-er physical differences of color, hair and bone” but the “differences – subtle, delicate and elusive, though they may be – which have silently but definitely separated men into groups.”

While these subtle forces have generally followed the natural cleavage of common blood, descent and physical peculiarities, they have at other times swept across and ignored these. At all times, however, they have divided human beings into races, which, while they perhaps transcend scientific definition, nevertheless, are clearly defined to the eye of the historian and sociologist.

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. [...] What then is a race? It is a vast family of human beings, generally of common blood and language, always of common history, traditions and impulses, who are both voluntarily and involuntarily striving together for the accomplishment of certain more or less vividly conceived ideals of life.¹⁶

Du Bois considers that, once we look with the eye of the historian and sociologist, there are not three but eight “distinctly differenti-

ated races, in the sense in which history tells us the word must be used.”

They are, the Slavs of eastern Europe, the Teutons of middle Europe, the English of Great Britain and America, the Romance nations of Southern and Western Europe, the Negroes of Africa and America, the Semitic people of Western Asia and Northern Africa, the Hindoos of Central Asia, and the Mongolians of Eastern Asia.

“There are,” he concedes “other minor race groups, as the American Indians, the Esquimaux and the South Sea Islanders; these larger races, too, are far from homogeneous.”¹⁷ It is a measure of the instability of the term “race” in Du Bois’s language, that this list is different from the list of the six racial brothers of the Negro “seventh son” in *The Souls*. To see why this is, we must read further:

The question now is: What is the real distinction between these nations? Is it physical differences of blood, color and cranial measurements? Certainly we must all acknowledge that physical differences play a great part. [...] But while race differences have followed along mainly physical lines, yet no mere physical distinction would really define or explain the deeper differences – the cohesiveness and continuity of these groups. The deeper differences are spiritual, psychical, differences – undoubtedly based on the physical, but infinitely transcending them.¹⁸

And all these nations are “striving, each in its own way, to develop for civilization its particular message, its particular ideal, which shall help guide the world nearer and nearer that perfection of human life for which we all long”.¹⁹

Notice how easily Du Bois slips back and forth between talk of “race” and talk of “nation” in these passages. From a contemporary point of view Du Bois’s historical “races” are an odd assortment. The three races – black, white, and yellow – are replaced,

once we take this historical view, by eight groups of which only one, the English, is un-controversially a nation (even though Du Bois then, more controversially, takes it to be spread over two continents). Two of the groups, German and Slav, though not nations had Pan-German and Pan-Slavist nationalist movements in place which wanted them to be so;²⁰ two – Romance and Semite – are arguably zones of shared culture; and three – Negro, Hindu and Mongolian – are neither nations nor cultures but vast assemblages of both. Nevertheless, in rejecting a purely scientific or biological picture of races and in thinking of African-Americans as fundamentally like a nation, he is moving against the grain of much turn-of-the century American thought.

What Du Bois is insisting on is, in fact, an account of racial or national membership that is focused on the ideas – or, as you might also say, the *principles* – expressed in the collective life of a people: and in insisting on this he is thinking about national history in the way that it would have been taught at the University of Berlin. It was, after all, the standard understanding of Hegel's philosophy of history that human experience was the working out of an idea – in fact of something called *the Idea* – in history.

In the less metaphysical version of the story that Du Bois borrows not from the philosophers but from the historians, nations are the historical expressions not of one grand universal Idea but of slightly less grand particular ideas. The English nation stands, Du Bois says in a perfectly conventional formulation, for “constitutional liberty and commercial freedom”; the German for “science and philosophy”; the Romance nations for “literature and art.” Du Bois, then, is searching for the Negro Idea.

The full, complete Negro message of the whole Negro race has not as yet been given to the world. [...] The question is, then: how shall this message be delivered; how shall these various ideals be realized? The answer is plain: by the development of these race groups, not as individuals, but as races. [...] For the development of Negro genius, of Negro literature and art, of Negro spirit, only Ne-

groes bound and welded together, Negroes inspired by one vast ideal, can work out in its fullness the great message we have for humanity.²¹

No one who has read Herder's 1781 *Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* will fail to recognize in Du Bois all the elements of the literary nationalism of the philosopher of the *Sturm und Drang*. As Charles Taylor has pointed out, Herder "applied his conception of originality at two levels, not only to the individual person among other persons, but also to the culture-bearing people among other peoples. Just like individuals, a Volk should be true to itself, that is, its own culture."²² So there is, in the tradition on which Du Bois, that great believer in personal individuality, is drawing, no difficulty in stressing the importance of the development of individuals and of "race groups" as well. Wilhelm von Humboldt put it this way in the early 1790's in his essay *The Limits of State Action*, "It is through a social union [...] based on the internal wants and capacities of its members, that each is enabled to participate in the rich collective resources of all the others. The experience of all, even the rudest, nations, furnishes us an example of a union formative of individual character, in the union of the sexes. [...] The effectiveness of all such relations as instruments of cultivation, entirely depends on the extent to which the members can succeed in combining their personal independence with the intimacy of the association [...]"²³ To speak in the more flowery language of individuality that we inherit from Romanticism: your being a Negro should shape the authentic self whose expression is the project of your life.

For Herder, every nation has a distinct governing spirit, its *Volksgeist* (a word one might translate as "national soul"), which is expressed in every aspect of its social and cultural life. So the character of each nation can be found not only in the writings of its literary geniuses – in Goethe and Hölderlin – but also in its folklore; the folk songs and the folk tales collected, for example, under Herder's inspiration, by the Grimm brothers. Herder would have understood exactly why Du Bois prefaced each chapter both with a literary epigraph and with a phrase of one of what

he called the sorrow songs. Negro spirituals were the folksong of Afro-America. As Thomas Carlyle, who introduced German philosophy to the English-speaking world, had written in 1831 in a discussion of a history of German poetry:

The history of a nation's poetry is the essence of its history, political, scientific, religious. With all these the complete Historian of Poetry will be familiar: the national physiognomy, in its finest traits, and through its successive stages of growth, will be clear to him; he will discern the grand spiritual tendency of every period [...].²⁴

Du Bois's indication of this intellectual legacy is hard to avoid, once you recall this background: it is there, after all, in the title. He is showing his readers the *Geist* of a Black *Volk*.

For Herder, as clearly for Du Bois, each *Volksgeist* possesses something of distinctive value. And one of Herder's claims about historical method is that we must recognize how different the inner life of different peoples is. Nevertheless, Herder equally fervently insisted that, "*Das Menschengeschlecht ist ein Ganzes.*" Indeed part of the providential point of human history is that each people, each *Volk*, should express its distinct character through its history; because it is only through each nation's following its distinctive path that history as a whole can achieve its meaning. It is one of the barely articulated themes of *The Souls* that the experience of black people in America, with all its horrors, may be part of what has prepared them for their task. One wonders if this isn't what he meant when he wrote in *Dusk of Dawn* many years later:

This race talk is, of course, a joke, and frequently it has driven me insane and probably will permanently in the future; and yet, seriously and soberly, we black folk are the salvation of mankind.²⁵

The placing of the Negro as a Folk among Folks presupposes, then, this implicit reference to a global perspective, the perspec-

tive of humanity. Black Folk must find their place among the nations; that they *have* a place is what we might call the Herderian premise. White America, for Du Bois, is also composed of folks, too, of course (even though he later wrote an essay called “The Souls of White Folk,” which lumps them all together). And because white Americans came, as Du Bois was very clear, from different European nations, they represented different national principles. So Du Bois’s reference is international and comparative in another way: each group in the American congregation of nationalities is a local branch of a people whose character can be detected in its history elsewhere. This idea connects Du Bois to Africans, just as it connects the James’s, William and Henry, to England.

We are inclined, nowadays, to suppose that the mechanism of this attachment must have been a biological theory of race. Why else would Du Bois think he had anything in common with people raised in an entirely different culture and climate on a continent thousands of miles away; a continent on which, in 1903, he had, as yet, not set foot? But we can tell at once from the easy movement back between talk of race and talk of nation that Du Bois’s conception of what accounted for the unity of the Negro people was not what we would call biology. As we saw in the “Conservation of Races,” he believed that the biological – or as he put it “physical” – similarities were not the crucial ones. What mattered, he thought, were “[t]he deeper differences [which] are spiritual, psychical, differences – undoubtedly based on the physical, but infinitely transcending them.”

In the same place, in a passage we have already reviewed, he speaks of the members of the folk striving together voluntarily or involuntarily for certain “ideals of life.” If we abandon the thought of striving involuntarily for an ideal, there is nevertheless something important here in Du Bois’s claim that races matter because a racial identity allows people to work together for an ideal. Throughout his long life Du Bois did believe that the people of a race had much naturally in common, much history they shared; but he always also thought that they had many common

purposes. It is this that makes it quite proper to speak of his attitude to his racial identity as a form of nationalism: he believed about the Negro race everything that an American patriot of his day would have believed about America, except that it needed a single country, a nation-state, to gather its people in. So he believed in a Negro national character and a Negro national destiny; and he thought it was the duty of black people – especially of the most talented black people – to work together in the service of the Negro people. As he had put it in the Academy Creed, with which he ended the “Conservation of Races,”

1. We believe that the Negro people, as a race, have a contribution to make to civilization and humanity, which no other race can make.

2. We believe it the duty of the Americans of Negro descent, as a body, to maintain their race identity until this mission of the Negro people is accomplished, and the ideal of human brotherhood has become a practical possibility.²⁶

The Negro national character gave black folk special gifts – the gifts of the seventh son – but it was their duty to develop these gifts and deliver their contribution to mankind.

There is a word for the character of the nationalism that Du Bois expressed: it is *cosmopolitan*. Even here, in defining a Negro creed, he speaks not just of racial but of human brotherhood.

In a 1788 essay in the *Teutscher Merkur*, Christoph Martin Wieland – once called “the German Voltaire” – wrote, in a characteristic expression of the cosmopolitan ideal: “Cosmopolitans [...] regard all the peoples of the earth as so many branches of a single family, and the universe as a state, of which they, with innumerable other rational beings, are citizens, promoting together under the general laws of nature the perfection of the whole, while each in his own fashion is busy about his own well-being.”²⁷ And Voltaire himself – whom nobody, alas, ever called the French Wieland – spoke eloquently of the obligation to understand those

with whom we share the planet, linking that need explicitly with our global economic interdependence. “Fed by the products of their soil, dressed in their fabrics, amused by games they invented, instructed even by their ancient moral fables, why would we neglect to understand the mind of these nations, among whom our European traders have traveled ever since they could find a way to get to them?”²⁸

But there are two strands that intertwine in the notion of cosmopolitanism. One is the general moral idea that we have obligations to others, obligations that stretch beyond those with whom we are related by the ties of kith and kind, or even the more formal ties of a shared citizenship. The other is that we take seriously not just the value of human life but of particular human lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance. People are different, the cosmopolitan knows, and there is much to learn from our differences. Because there are so many human possibilities worth exploring, we neither expect nor desire that every person or every society should converge on a single mode of life. Whatever our obligations are to others (or theirs to us) they often have the right to go their own way. There will be times when these two ideals – universal concern and respect for legitimate difference – clash. There’s a sense in which cosmopolitanism is the name not of the solution but of the challenge.

A citizen of the world: how far can we take that idea? Are you really supposed to abjure all local allegiances and partialities in the name of this vast abstraction, humanity? Some of its proponents were pleased to think so; and they often made easy targets of ridicule. “Friend of men, and enemy of almost every man he had to do with,” Thomas Carlyle memorably said of the eighteenth-century physiocrat the Marquis de Mirabeau, who wrote the treatise *L’Ami des hommes* when he wasn’t too busy jailing his own son. “A lover of his kind, but a hater of his kindred,” Edmund Burke said of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who handed each of the five children he fathered to an orphanage.

Yet the impartialist version of the cosmopolitan creed has continued to hold a steely fascination. Virginia Woolf once exhorted “freedom from unreal loyalties” – to nation, sex, school, neighborhood, and on and on. Tolstoy, in the same spirit, inveighed against the “stupidity” of patriotism. “To destroy war, destroy patriotism,” he wrote in an 1896 essay – a couple of decades before the Tsar was swept away by a revolution in the name of the international working class. Some contemporary philosophers have similarly urged that the boundaries of nations are morally irrelevant – accidents of history with no rightful claim on our conscience.

But if there are friends of cosmopolitanism who make one nervous, we all share a disgust with cosmopolitanism’s noisiest foes. Both Hitler and Stalin – who agreed about little else, save that murder was the first instrument of politics – launched regular invectives against “rootless cosmopolitans”; and while, for both, anti-cosmopolitanism was often just a euphemism for anti-Semitism, they were right to see cosmopolitanism as their enemy. For they both required a kind of loyalty to one portion of humanity – a nation, a class – that ruled out loyalty to all of humanity. And the one thought that cosmopolitans share is that no local loyalty can ever justify forgetting that each human being has responsibilities to every other. Fortunately, we need take sides neither with the nationalist who abandons all foreigners nor with the hardcore cosmopolitan who regards her friends and fellow citizens with icy impartiality. The position worth defending might be called (in both senses) a partial cosmopolitanism.

There’s a striking passage, to this point, in George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*, published in 1876; which was, as it happens, the year when England’s first – and, so far, last – Jewish Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, was elevated to the peerage as Earl of Beaconsfield. Disraeli, though baptized and brought up in the Church of England, always had a proud consciousness of his Jewish ancestry (given the family name, which his father spelled D’Israeli, it would have been hard to ignore). But Deronda, who has been raised in England as a Christian gentleman, discovers his Jewish

ancestry only as an adult; and his response is to commit himself to the furtherance of his “hereditary people”:

It was as if he had found an added soul in finding his ancestry – his judgment no longer wandering in the mazes of impartial sympathy, but choosing, with the noble partiality which is man’s best strength, the closer fellowship that makes sympathy practical – exchanging that bird’s-eye reasonableness which soars to avoid preference and loses all sense of quality, for the generous reasonableness of drawing shoulder to shoulder with men of like inheritance.

Notice that in claiming a Jewish loyalty – an “added soul” – Deronda is not rejecting a human one. As he says to his mother: “I think it would have been right that I should have been brought up with the consciousness that I was a Jew, but it must always have been a good to me to have as wide an instruction and sympathy as possible.” This is the same Deronda, after all, who has earlier explained his decision to study abroad in these eminently cosmopolitan terms: “I want to be an Englishman, but I want to understand other points of view. And I want to get rid of a merely English attitude in studies.”²⁹ Loyalties and local allegiances determine more than what we want; they determine who we are. And Eliot’s talk of the “closer fellowship that makes sympathy practical” echoes Cicero’s claim that “society and human fellowship will be best served if we confer the most kindness on those with whom we are most closely associated.”³⁰ A creed that disdains the partialities of kinfolk and community may have a past, but it has no future. The challenge of cosmopolitanism is to combine this recognition of the need for partiality and the value of difference with the recognition of the value of encounter across identities. Du Bois, I believe, almost always got this balance right.

Du Bois’s cosmopolitanism is displayed in his openness to the achievements of other civilizations – his celebration of European culture, high and low, is always evident. In *The Souls of Black Folk* we can see this in “The Coming of John,” when the black John is moved beyond measure by Wagner’s music: “he sat in

dreamland, and started when, after a hush, rose high and clear the music [...]. The infinite beauty of the wail lingered and swept through every muscle of his frame, and put it all a-tune.”³¹ But it is also present in the many ways in which, as Russell Berman has pointed out, the fictional story of the two Johns echoes the themes and tropes of Wagner’s *Lohengrin*, the very opera by which the black John was so transported.

To give but one instance: the Sorrow Song that begins the essay, “I’ll hear the trumpet sound,” contains the lines:

You may bury me in the East,
You may bury me in the West,
But I’ll hear that trumpet sound
In that morning.

Berman points out that these lines echo the lines in which King Heinrich promises equality between Germans in the East and the West of the German Empire:

Ob Ost, ob West? Das gelte Allen gleich!

Du Bois’s cultural cosmopolitanism is equally evident in his citations not just of German high culture but of its folk culture as well: as when he quotes a German folksong in the final pages of *The Souls*: “Jetz Geh i’ an’s brunele, trink aber net.” (*Now I’m goin’ to the well, but I ain’t gonna drink.*)³²

Du Bois’s cosmopolitanism is not just aesthetic: he accepts the fundamental cosmopolitan moral idea that, whatever his duties to the Negro, he has obligations to those outside his racial horizon; and he is a methodological cosmopolitan, finally, also, in his insistence, as I have been pointing out, on adopting a globally comparative perspective even when he is talking about the United States. Du Bois sees the problem of Jim Crow as part of a global tragedy: the color line imposes Jim Crow in Georgia, but it also imposes a destructive colonialism on “Asia and Africa [...] and the islands of the sea.” This tone is consistent. After the First

World War, writing in criticism of American hostility to the Negro, he says:

Conceive this nation, of all human peoples, engaged in a crusade to make the “World Safe for Democracy”! Can you imagine the United States protesting against Turkish atrocities in Armenia, while the Turks are silent about mobs in Chicago and St. Louis; what is Louvain compared with Memphis, Waco, Washington, Dyersburg, and Estill Springs? In short what is the black man but America’s Belgium, and how could America condemn Germany for that which she commits, just as brutally, within her own borders.³³

There can be little doubt, then, that Du Bois deserves to be called a nationalist – I understand this is not news – but also a cosmopolitan. And it is hard, I think, for most people nowadays to think of cosmopolitan nationalism as anything other than an oxymoron. Surely cosmopolitanism – the idea that all human beings are, in some sense, fellow citizens of the world – is the very opposite of nationalism – the conviction that the boundaries of nationality should be the boundaries of citizenship? And yet, as we shall see, elegant as this argument is, it is simply a mistake.

Not a mistake, however, that someone with Du Bois’s intellectual background was likely to make. Friedrich Meinecke – who was only a little older than Du Bois and, like him, had studied with Treitschke – wrote, just five years after *The Souls* was published, “Cosmopolitanism and nationalism stood side by side in a close, living relationship for a long time.”³⁴ Here Meinecke was discussing the philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte, one of the key figures in the transition from Kant to Hegel; but the point he is making applies quite widely both to philosophers and to practical patriots, which is why the book in which he makes it is called *Cosmopolitanism and the National State*. Anyone who followed – as Du Bois certainly did – the movements of nationalism in nineteenth century Europe would have recognized the sentiment

of Giuseppe Mazzini, the great Italian patriot, writing in 1844 on *The Duties of Man*:

Your first duties – first as regards importance – are, as I have already told you, towards Humanity. You are *men* before you are either citizens or fathers. If you do not embrace the whole human family in your affection; if you do not bear witness to your belief in the Unity of that family, [...] if, wheresoever a fellow-creature suffers, or the dignity of human nature is violated by falsehood or tyranny – you are not ready, if able, to aid the unhappy, and do not feel called upon to combat, if able, for the redemption of the betrayed and oppressed – you violate your law of life, you comprehend not that Religion which will be the guide and blessing of the future.

But what can each of you, singly, *do* for the moral improvement and progress of Humanity? [...] The individual is too insignificant, and Humanity too vast. The mariner of Brittany prays to God as he puts to sea; “*Help me, my God! my boat is so small and Thy ocean so wide!*” And this prayer is the true expression of the condition of each one of you, until you find the means of infinitely multiplying your forces and powers of action. This means was provided for you by God when He gave you a country [...].³⁵

In 1840, in a famous essay on “Byron and Goethe,” Mazzini had written admiringly of the English poet who had gone to Greece to fight for its independence:

I know no more beautiful symbol of the future destiny and mission of art than the death of Byron in Greece. The holy alliance of poetry with the cause of the peoples; the union – still so rare – of thought and action – which alone completes the human Word, and is destined to emancipate the world; the grand solidarity of all nations in the conquest of the rights ordained by God for all his children, and in the accomplishment of that mission for which alone such

rights exist – all that is now the religion and the hope of the party of progress throughout Europe, is gloriously typified in this image, which we, barbarians that we are, have already forgotten.³⁶

The European nationalism of the nineteenth century, at least in the elevated and philosophical formulations that Du Bois would have studied, as in the form he experienced it more directly in Berlin, recognized that the demand for national rights only made sense as a moral demand if it was claimed equally for all peoples. Du Bois's defense of the Negro and of the legitimacy of Negroes, like himself, having a higher degree of concern for their own kind, was always framed within the recognition both that they had obligations to people of other races and that they would gain greatly from conversation across the races. His nationalism, his partiality for the Negro – like Mazzini's Italian nationalism – never descended into chauvinism. When he is critical of “white people,” it is most often for a general failure to recognize and implement the universality of the very values they claim as their own. As he said in *Dusk of Dawn*:

The democracy which the white world seeks to defend does not exist. It has been splendidly conceived and discussed, but not realized. If it is ever to grow strong enough for self-defense and for embracing the world and developing human culture to its highest, it must include not simply the lower classes among the whites now excluded from voice in the control of industry; but in addition to that it must include the colored peoples of Asia and Africa, now hopelessly imprisoned by poverty and ignorance. Until these latter are included and in as far as they are not, democracy is a mockery and contains within itself the seeds of its own destruction.³⁷

Du Bois always recognized, too, the risk that black folk, facing a world in which so many of the white people they met would refuse contact with them, would be forced into an un-cosmopolitan withdrawal from the contact across nations and peoples, the

contact that the cosmopolitan claims is vivifying and essential. He makes the point in *Dusk of Dawn*, when he talks of the way American racism imprisons black people within the race:

Practically, this group imprisonment within a group has various effects upon the prisoner. He becomes provincial and centered upon the problems of his particular group. He tends to neglect the wider aspects of national life and human existence. On the one hand he is unselfish so far as his inner group is concerned. He thinks of himself not as an individual but as a group man, a “race” man. His loyalty to this group idea tends to be almost unending and balks at almost no sacrifice. On the other hand, his attitude toward the environing race congeals into a matter of unreasoning resentment and even hatred, deep disbelief in them and refusal to conceive honesty and rational thought on their part. This attitude adds to the difficulties of conversation, intercourse, understanding between groups.³⁸

Du Bois was in his seventies when he published the book from which these words come. Notice that everything he says here about black people enclosed within an American context can be applied equally to Americans enclosed in a provincial nationalism within the world. This formulation is surely deliberately abstract: it is a critique of the anti-cosmopolitan tendencies of nationalism that is completely general. And indeed, in “The Souls of White Folk,” which he published in *Darkwater* in 1920, he expressed pity for white Americans “imprisoned and enthralled, hampered and made miserable” by racism in very much the same terms.³⁹ Still, if this careful statement by the aging scholar is more sober and universal, it is also, I think, less moving than the way he expressed it half his life earlier in *The Souls of Black Folk*. There he spoke with a cosmopolitan instinct for conversation across peoples in these justly more famous words:

I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls. From

out the caves of evening that swing between the strong-limbed earth and the tracery of the stars, I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension. So, wed with Truth, I dwell above the Veil.

In 1900 Du Bois said that the color line – the double problem of racism within the West and racial imperialism outside it – would be the problem of the twentieth-century. In the century of Hitler and of Stalin (and, for that matter, of the Khmer Rouge and Hutu Power) we cannot say that his exclusive focus on racism directed against people of color turned out to be justified. Indeed, I don't know if it's worth trying to decide what slogan would properly identify *the* problem of a century with so many problems: but it was undeniably a century in which more of the cosmopolitan spirit – a little more respect, that is, for difference and a little more concern for the moral interests of strangers – would have made a huge difference for the better. The record of such prophecies is not great: but if I were asked for an enemy of human hope for our new century, I would say it was anti-cosmopolitanism; one that has taken new forms in our time but that already underlay the indifference and contempt for others that Du Bois dubbed “the problem of the color line.” The challenge of the twenty-first century is, I believe, the cosmopolitan challenge. And in reading Du Bois today I am struck by how much his spirit engages this new challenge. The world has changed in the century since *The Souls of Black Folk* first appeared; but the spirit that animates it is, I believe, as relevant now as it was then.

Cosmopolitans think they can learn something from those they differ from, even from those they disagree with. We recognize that people have a right to their own lives: it is this connection that ties all cosmopolitanism – like Du Bois's cosmopolitanism – so closely to the idea of freedom. As John Stuart Mill said, in one of my favorite passages from my favorite chapter of *On Liberty*:

If it were only that people have diversities of taste, that is reason enough for not attempting to shape them all after one model. But different persons also require different conditions for their spiritual development; and can no more exist healthily in the same moral, than all the variety of plants can exist in the same physical atmosphere and climate. The same things which are helps to one person towards the cultivation of his higher nature, are hindrances to another [...] unless there is a corresponding diversity in their modes of life, they neither obtain their fair share of happiness, nor grow up to the mental, moral, and aesthetic statures of which their nature is capable.⁴⁰

Du Bois believed that deeply, too. And it is perhaps not so surprising: after all, the philosopher whose influence is most evident in *On Liberty* is the same Wilhelm von Humboldt who created the curriculum Du Bois studied at the Friedrich Wilhelms University in Berlin.

Notes

- 1 This article is based on a Distinguished W.E.B. Du Bois Lecture, held at Humboldt-Universität on June 1st 2005.
- 2 *Dusk of Dawn*, in: *Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1986), 648.
- 3 *Dusk of Dawn*, in: *Writings*, 587.
- 4 *Dusk of Dawn*, in: *Writings*, 661. The passage continues: “Such is the soul of the Negro.”
- 5 “Criteria of Negro Art,” in: *The Crisis*, 1926, in: *Writings*, 1000.
- 6 “The Conservation of Races,” in: *Writings*, 822.
- 7 See Ross Posnock, “The Distinction of Du Bois: Aesthetics, Pragmatism, Politics” *American Literary History* 7:3 “Imagining a National Culture” (Autumn 1995), 519.
- 8 Friedrich Schiller, “Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen, in einer Reihe von Briefen,” 1795, available at: <http://www.kuehnle-online.de/literatur/schiller/prosa/aestherzieh/15.htm>. “One will never err if one seeks a person’s ideal of beauty on the same road on which he satisfies his appetite for play. [...] For, to express the matter finally at last, human beings are only at play, when they are human in the full meaning of the word, and they are only completely human when they are at play.” (Translation mine).
- 9 Posnock, “The Distinction...,” 518–9.
- 10 Russell A. Berman, “Du Bois and Wagner: Race, Nation, and Culture between the United States and Germany” *The German Quarterly* 70:2 (Spring 1997), 123–35.
- 11 *The Souls of Black Folk*, in: *Writings*, 372.
- 12 W.E.B. Du Bois, “To the Nations of the World.” As cited by Herbert Aptheker in: “W.E.B. Du Bois and the Struggle against Racism in the World,” available at: <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/solidarity/dubois-0783.html>.
- 13 *The Souls of Black Folk*, in: *Writings*, 365.
- 14 Thomas C. Holt, “The Political Uses of Alienation: W.E.B. Du Bois on Politics, Race, and Culture, 1903–1940” *American Quarterly* 42:2 (June 1990), 301–33.
- 15 W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Conservation of Races,” in: *Writings*, 816.
- 16 W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Conservation of Races,” in: *Writings*, 816–7.
- 17 W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Conservation of Races,” in: *Writings*, 817–8.
- 18 W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Conservation of Races,” in: *Writings*, 818.
- 19 W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Conservation of Races,” in: *Writings*, 819.

- 20 The Alldeutscher Verbund had been founded in 1893; František Palacký (whose theory of central European history was that it was a struggle between Slavs and Germans) had presided over a Pan-Slav Congress in Prague in 1848. Both movements were strongly philosophically indebted to Herder.
- 21 W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Conservation of Races,” in: *Writings*, 820.
- 22 Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton U P, 1992), 31.
- 23 “Durch Verbindungen also, die aus dem Innren der Wesen entspringen, muß einer den Reichtum des andren sich eigen machen. Eine solche charakterbildende Verbindung ist, nach der Erfahrung aller, auch sogar der rohesten Nationen, z.B. die Verbindung der beiden Geschlechter. [...] Der bildende Nutzen solcher Verbindungen beruht immer auf dem Grade, in welchem sich die Selbständigkeit der Verbundenen zugleich mit der Innigkeit der Verbindung erhält.” Wilhelm von Humboldt, *The Limits of State Action*, ed. J.W. Burrow (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1969), 9. Humboldt’s essay, though written in 1791–2, was not first published in a fairly complete form until 1852. See the editor’s introduction, vii.
- 24 *The Edinburgh Review*, 1831.
- 25 W.E.B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, in: *Writings*, 657.
- 26 W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Conservation of Races,” in: *Writings*, 825. As Robert Bernasconi, the philosopher who, in our day, has pursued the historical development of ideas about race most deeply, has argued, the talk here of maintaining race identity reflects a preoccupation that came from late nineteenth-century biological speculations about race. In the middle of the century, Southern slavery apologists like Josiah Nott had argued that census data from the 1840 census showed that African-Americans with European ancestry – Nott, like Du Bois, would have called them mulattos – had higher mortality rates and lower fertility rates than either pure white or pure black people. Nott was rewriting Buffon’s idea that species were defined by the absence of fertile offspring, in the face of the evident fact that blacks and whites were, by this criterion, not separate species. Perhaps, Nott thought, if the offspring were *less* fertile, that would do. He used this to argue that there really was a biological reason to avoid race-mixture – miscegenation – and a biological reality to races. So the possible disappearance of the Negro was a possibility Du Bois had to argue against. I learned all this from a talk given by Professor Bernasconi at a conference at SUNY Buffalo on “Black Ethnicity, Latino Race?” on April 2, 2005.
- 27 Christoph Martin Wieland, “Das Geheimniß des Kosmopolitenordens” *Der Teutsche Merkur* (August 1788), 107.

- 28 *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*, in: *Oeuvres Complètes de Voltaire*, vol. 16 (Paris: De l'Imprimerie de la Société Littéraire-Typographique, 1784), 241. Voltaire is speaking specifically here of "the Orient," and especially of China and India, but he would surely not have denied its more general application.
- 29 George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (London: Penguin, 1995), 745, 661–2, 183.
- 30 Cicero, *De Officiis*, 1.50.
- 31 W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, in: *Writings*, 526–7.
- 32 W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, in: *Writings*, 543.
- 33 W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Souls of White Folk," in: *Writings*, 926. The American cities are the sites of lynchings; Louvain was the Belgian city where German troops ran riot in August 1914, murdering civilians and destroying many of the buildings.
- 34 Friedrich Meinecke, *Cosmopolitanism and the National State*, trans. Robert B. Kimber (Princeton: Princeton U P, 1970), 94. Originally published in 1908 as *Weltbürgertum und Nationalstaat: Studien zur Genesis des deutschen Nationalstaats*. Meinecke is discussing Fichte at this point; but he has expressed the same claim in various ways by this point in discussions of Humboldt, Novalis, and Schlegel.
- 35 Mazzini continues: "as when, even as a wise overseer of labour distributes the various branches of employment according to the different capacities of the workmen, he divided Humanity into distinct groups or nuclei upon the face of the earth, thus creating the germ of nationalities." *An Essay On the Duties of Man Addressed to Workingmen* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1898), 57–8.
- 36 Giuseppe Mazzini, "Byron and Goethe," in: *The Harvard Classics: Literary and Philosophical Essays*, ed. Charles W. Eliot (New York: Collier & Son, 1909–1917), vol. 32.
- 37 W.E.B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, in: *Writings*, 679.
- 38 W.E.B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, in: *Writings*, 651.
- 39 W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Souls of White Folk," in: *Writings*, 926.
- 40 John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, vol. 18, in: *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vols. 1–33, ed. John M. Robson (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1963–1991), 270.