

PHI 1500: Major Issues in Philosophy

Session 27

December 9th, 2015



Race & Gender: (Mills &) DuBois

Mills takes up the constructivist understanding of race as the view that best explains scientific & anthropological data and cultural differences in racial categories.

Now, he turns to:

- ***“the question of the possible criteria for determining racial identity***
 - *and what happens when these criteria conflict.*

Seven possible candidates for racial self- & other-identification may be distinguished... [though] they usually function in conjunction with one another.

- **The categories are *bodily appearance, ancestry, self-awareness of ancestry, public awareness of ancestry, culture, experience, and self-identification.***

RACE AS WE KNOW IT HAS NO DETERMINISTIC, BIOLOGICAL BASIS: ALL THE SAME, RACE IS SO POWERFUL THAT IT CAN HAVE LIFE-OR-DEATH CONSEQUENCES.



biracial twins Lucy & Maria

Experience

- “Like culture, ‘**experience**’ has an unavoidable fuzziness, **but it is important**, for in the vertical racial systems we are considering **it is part of the core of what it is to be** (with all the metaphysical overtones of be) **a member of a particular race.**



- Thus in the United States, we naturally think of whiteness as being associated with the experience of racial privilege and of blackness as being associated with the experience of racial oppression.
 - Since criterial divergence is possible, so that **R_2 s who look like R_1 s and are not publicly identified as R_2 s will escape racism,**
 - it may then be alleged that these **R_2 s are not "really" R_2 s**, insofar as *the essence of being an R_2 is the experience of oppression as an R_2 .*
 - (This was Jelani Cobb’s main reason for denying that Rachel Dolezal is a black woman,
 - and also why people sometimes deny that white-passing biracial people are really people of color.)

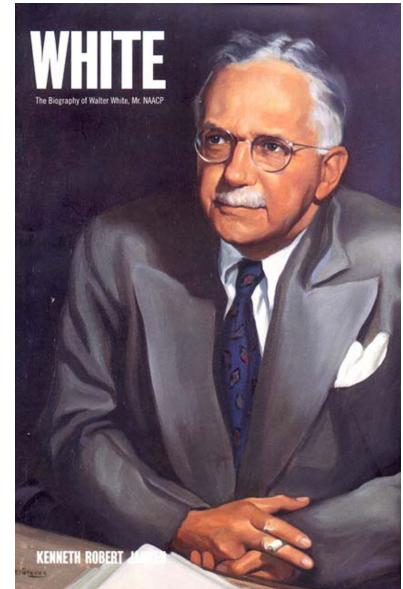
Subjective Identification

- “Finally, subjective identification—**what one sees oneself as—needs to be conceptually separated**
 - **from self-awareness of ancestry**, for one may refuse to recognize the validity of this criterion for racial membership;
 - **and from culture**, for one could still identify oneself as an R_1/R_2 while embracing R_2/R_1 culture;
 - **and finally from experience**, for one could have experiences characteristically taken to be definitive of the R_1/R_2 experience while denying that these experiences should be seen as definitive of who one is.
- As a further complication, self-awareness of ancestry is an either-or affair (either one knows or not),
 - whereas **subjective identification lends itself to degrees of variation**, in that one can weakly or strongly identify oneself as an R_1/R_2 ,
 - so that **this identification is less or more significant to one's sense of oneself and one's life projects.**
- » Philosopher Robert Gooding-Williams makes the useful distinction of ‘thin’ & “thick” senses of “black” to differentiate these varying degrees of self-identification for African-Americans.”



Mills' point is that the complexity of racial categorization leaves many open questions about what race someone belongs to if they:

- ***identify as one race, but sometimes pass as another for strategic reasons***
 - e.g. NAACP leader Walter White was socially categorized as black because he has 1/64th black ancestry, but had blond hair and blue eyes;
 - he used his ability to pass for a white man to investigate injustices against black Americans.
 - *Is he really black if he sometimes pretends otherwise?*
- ***permanently identify as the race they pass for instead of the one that matches their ancestry*** (either deliberately or by accident)
 - e.g., *is Rachel Dolezal black if she self-identifies as black but admits that her parents are white?*
- ***identify with the culture of a different race than their appearance/ancestry***
 - e.g., *is Eminem a “reverse Oreo”: white on the outside, but black on the inside?*





more problem cases about people who:

- ***use cosmetic surgery to change their appearance so they can pass for a different race than their ancestry***
 - *Did Michael Jackson become white through his skin lightening and facial reconstruction?*
- ***subvert the expectations for how people of that race treat people of other races***
 - *Are you no longer white if you don't participate in oppressing nonwhites?*
 - (Mills suggests that white people can opt out of discriminatory 'Whiteness'.)
- ***are biracial and claim a hybrid identity***
 - *Do people like Miguel have to choose which of their parent's races they identify with more closely?*
- ***try to opt out of having a race altogether***
 - *Can Raven Symone claim that she is "colorless"?*



➤ Our final topic of discussion is the *experience* of being viewed in terms of racial group membership.

W.E.B. DuBois (1868-1963): American philosopher and civil rights leader

- one of the founders of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People)
- proponent of the pan-African movement, which encouraged solidarity of all people of African descent

“Of Our Spiritual Strivings” (Ch. 1 of *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903), expresses DuBois’ view about *the phenomenology of race*,

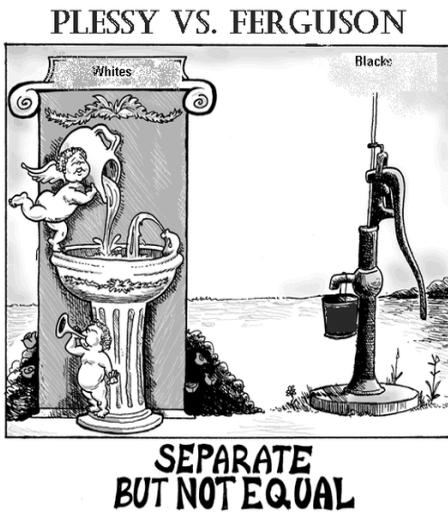
- i.e., the experience of being viewed through the lens of a racial category,
 - especially through concepts of ‘*the veil*’ and ‘*double-consciousness*’.
- **He also describes some specific challenges in striving for equal treatment in a hierarchical racial system.**
 - His views on this were of practical concern to civil rights leaders, who wanted to figure out the most effective tactics for their movement.

DuBois is writing **almost 40 years after the abolition of slavery** (via the Emancipation Proclamation, in 1865).

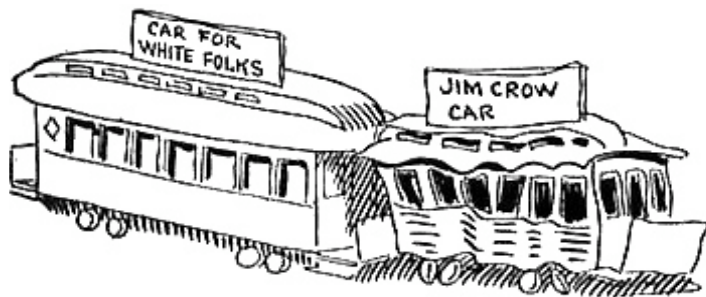
- But in this era, **there remained serious obstacles to black liberty, in the form of *Jim Crow*** (named after a black character from a minstrel show):

» a code of laws and norms upheld in many Southern states, which kept blacks separate from & subjugated by whites from the late 1870s-1965, including:

- segregation of schools, public facilities, military troops, prisons, etc.
 - upheld by Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896)
- prohibition of intermarriage and cohabitation



» in 1940, DuBois wrote that a **black man** “is a person who must ride ‘*Jim Crow*’ in Georgia”.



- In other words, **black individuals in this era could not choose their own identities;**
 - Instead, their identities were imposed upon them from the outside, in the form of restrictions and stereotypes.

DuBois writes,

- “Between me and the other world [i.e., white America]...there is ever an unasked question: ...***How does it feel to be a problem?***” (7)

“...**being a problem is a strange experience,**

- peculiar even for one who has never been anything else.”

- He recounts his first experience of being treated differently by another child because of his skin color.
 - “***Then it dawned on me, with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil.***”

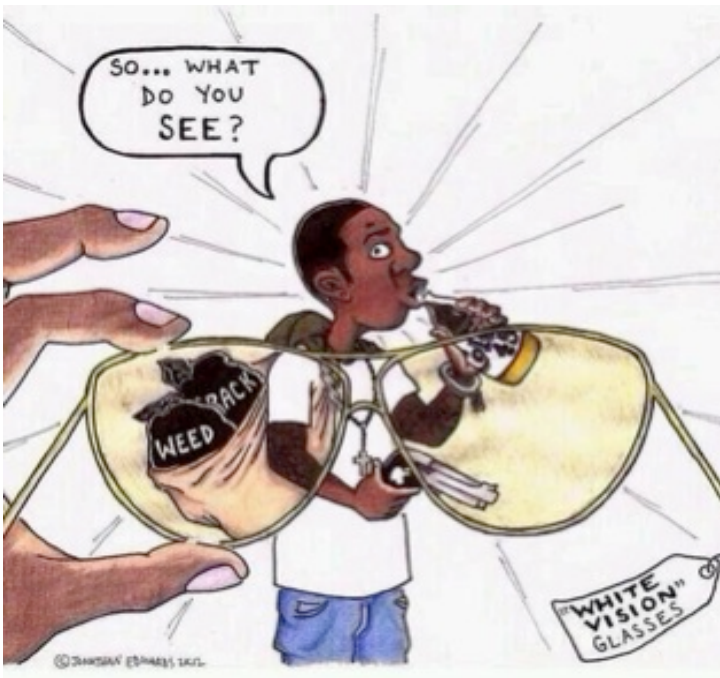
➤ **“The veil” is a metaphor for the whole structure of racism that divides white & black Americans.**

– *The veil tints/colors one side’s perspective of the other and of themselves.*



- » White Americans look at him through the veil
 - not as an individual, but as a representative of his race and all that blackness signifies culturally.
- » Moreover, his own understanding of himself is colored by the veil through which he is so accustomed to being seen.

One way in which 'the veil' persists today is through *implicit bias*:



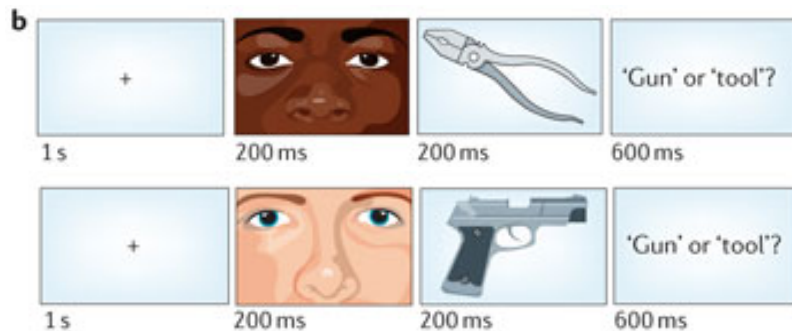
- unconscious negative attitudes about people of a particular group,
 - which may conflict with their explicitly-stated anti-racist attitudes.

- **video:** bit.ly/21Nah2n

- Our unconscious attitudes may even influence our *perception* in a dangerous way:

- In a study by Payne et al., subjects were more likely to misidentify a tool (wrench, hammer, etc.) as a gun after being quickly shown a black face than after seeing a white face.

- This suggests that people may harbor an unconscious association between black people and criminality.



Prejudice and Perception: The Role of Automatic and Controlled Processes in Misperceiving a Weapon

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DuBois writes that

- **black Americans are “gifted with second-sight in this American world,**
 - **...which yields him no true self-consciousness,**
 - **but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other [white] world.**
- He is saying that it is *impossible* for black individuals to ignore how they are viewed from the perspective of prejudiced whites.
 - Their experiences are always accompanied by an awareness that they may be judged or stereotyped on the basis of their race.
- “It is a peculiar sensation, this **double-consciousness,**
 - **this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others,**
 - of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.



- *One ever feels his **twoness,***
 - an American, a Negro;
 - two souls, two thoughts,
 - two unreconciled strivings;
 - two warring ideals in one dark body” (9)

Anyone can experience double-consciousness if they have to negotiate multiple identities.

- E.g., if you're the only person of your race/gender/religion/etc. in a room,
 - you might feel as if you're being seen as representative of your whole group.
- If instead you find yourself interacting with stranger who seems to be in your group,
 - you might feel the need to prove your alignment to that group.
 - In either case, you are conscious not only of your own perspective, but also of how you are seen from someone else's perspective.



One manifestation of double-consciousness is ***code-switching***:

- *changing one's speech and demeanor depending on who one is interacting with.*
 - Two videos from Key & Peele:
 - bit.ly/1TzvhUj
 - on.cc.com/1HTpfNZ



“The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,

- **this longing to attain self-conscious manhood,**
- **to *merge his double self* into a better and truer self.**

- **In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost.**



» He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa.”

- [I.e., the goal is *not* to achieve *black supremacy*.]

» He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world.

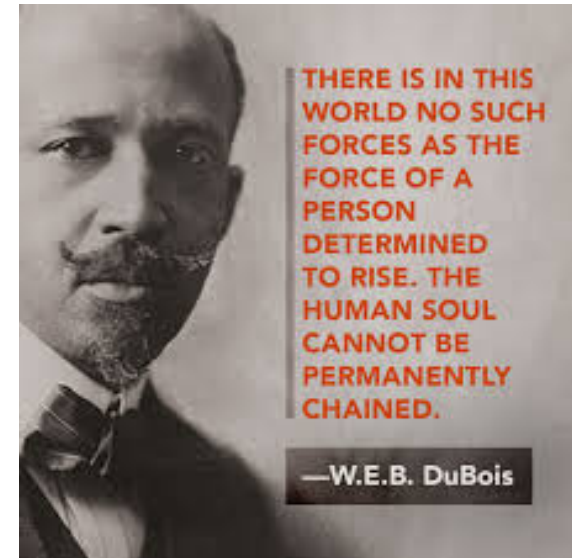
- [*Neither* is the goal just to erase one’s blackness in order to *assimilate seamlessly into white culture*.]

- **He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American,**

- without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows,
- without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.” (9)

“This, then, is the end [goal] of his striving:

- *to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture,*
 - [i.e., to have their culture celebrated & not mocked,]
- *to escape both death and isolation,*
 - [to be free from marginalization & violence,]
- *to...use his best powers and his latent genius.*
 - These powers of body and mind have in the past been strangely wasted, dispersed, or forgotten.” (9)



However, **achieving these ends is hindered by** “**the contradiction of double aims:**”

- on the one hand, the individual wants to be able to get ahead,
 - “to escape white contempt for a nation of mere hewers of wood & drawers of water” by showing his personal excellence,
 - but on the other hand, he wants to succeed not as an individual but in concert with his fellow men:
 - “to plough and nail and dig for a poverty-stricken horde”
- **Being torn between these two aims, and not knowing how to satisfy both, he doesn’t know how to proceed.**

DuBois discusses the *disillusionment* experienced by black Americans following the abolition of slavery.

– “...few men ever worshipped Freedom with half such unquestioning faith as did the American Negro for two centuries.

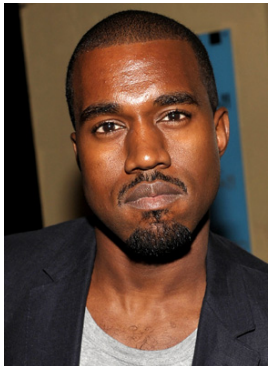
- » To him, so far as he thought & dreamed, slavery was indeed the sum of all villainies, the cause of all sorrow, the root of all prejudice;
- » **Emancipation was the key to a promised land** of sweeter beauty than ever stretched before the eyes of wearied Israelites.
- » ...At last it came,—suddenly, fearfully, like a dream.



- **Years have passed away since then...** forty years of national life, forty years of renewal and development,
 - and yet the swarthy spectre sits in its accustomed seat at the Nation's feast.
 - The Nation has not yet found peace from its sins;
 - **the freedman has not yet found in freedom his promised land.**
- Whatever of good may have come in these years of change,
 - **the shadow of a deep disappointment rests upon the Negro people”** (10-11)

DuBois recounts struggles for voting rights and educational opportunities,

- using an analogy to the biblical journey to the Promised Land.
 - “To the tired climbers, the horizon was ever dark, the mists were often cold, Canaan [the biblical Promised Land] was always dim and far away.”
- **He explains how this adversity fostered “reflection and self-examination;**
 - it changed the child of Emancipation to the youth with dawning self-consciousness, self-realization, self-respect.
 - In those somber forests of his striving **his own soul rose before him,**
 - and **he saw himself,—darkly as through a veil;**
 - and **yet he saw in himself some faint revelation of his power, of his mission.**
 - » He began to have a dim **feeling that, to attain his place in the world, he must be himself, and not another.”** (11)



- DuBois is suggesting that the fight for civil rights has *helped black Americans discover the **spiritual core** that ties them together as a race.*

➤ *Does such spiritual commonality really exist?*

He recommends a multi-pronged approach to move forward:

- **“The bright ideals of the past,**—physical freedom, political power, the training of brains and the training of hands,**—all these in turn have waxed and waned,** until even the last grows dim and overcast.
 - **Are they all wrong,—all false?**
 - No, not that, but each alone was over-simple and incomplete,
 - the dreams of a credulous race-childhood, or the fond imaginings of the other world which does not know and does not want to know our power.
- **To be really true, all these ideals must be melted and welded into one.**
 - **The training of the schools** we need today more than ever,
—the training of deft hands, quick eyes and ears, and above all the broader, deeper, higher culture of gifted minds and pure hearts.
 - **The power of the ballot** we need in sheer self-defense,
—else what shall save us from a second slavery?
 - **Freedom,** too, the long-sought, we still seek,—the freedom of life and limb, the freedom to work and think, the freedom to love and aspire.
 - **Work, culture, liberty,—all these we need not singly but together, not successively but together, each growing and aiding each...**” (13-14)