

## On What Matters for African Americans: W. E. B. Du Bois's "Double Consciousness" in the Light of Derek Parfit's Reasons and Persons

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### *Abstract*

*In Reasons and Persons (1984), the greatest contribution to utilitarian philosophy since Henry Sidgwick's The Methods of Ethics (1874), Derek Parfit supports his Reductionist contention "that personal identity is not what matters" by turning to the neurosurgical findings of Roger Wolcott Sperry. Parfit's scientifically informed argument has important implications for W. E. B. Du Bois's contentious hypothesis of African-American "double-consciousness," which he initially advanced in "Strivings of the Negro People" (1897), before amending for inclusion in The Souls of Black Folk (1903). An analysis of "Of the Coming of John," chapter 13 in The Souls of Black Folk, helps to trace these ramifications, resituating Du Bois's notion from the pragmatist to the utilitarian tradition, and revealing how his concept effectively prefigured Parfit's scientifically informed Reductionism.*

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In four years as a student at Harvard University (1888–1892), W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963) earned a bachelor's degree in philosophy, gained a master's degree in history, and conducted twelve months of doctoral research. As his autobiography attests, however, the cumulative effect of these studies undermined Du Bois's unmitigated commitment to "the lovely but sterile land of philosophical speculation." In reaction, he "conceived the idea of applying philosophy to an historical interpretation of race relations" (148). That application, which would ultimately forward his "program for the Negro" (148), concerned the health of African-American consciousness. Yet, Du Bois's critics, while repeatedly analyzing this attempt, have consistently failed to situate that treatment in the utilitarian tradition. The following paper, which recognizes Du Bois advance beyond his erstwhile mentor William James (1842–1910),

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redresses that situational failure with recourse to Derek Parfit's (1942–) *Reasons and Persons* (1984), thereby answering Lucius Outlaw's call "to give Du Bois's work the kind of careful consideration that is cultivated in attending to the works of canonical figures in philosophy" (6). In *Reasons and Persons*, the greatest contribution to utilitarian philosophy since Henry Sidgwick's *The Methods of Ethics* (1874), Parfit supports his reductionist contention "*that personal identity is not what matters*" (255; emphasis original) by turning to the neurosurgical findings of Roger Wolcott Sperry. As Hixson Professor of Psychobiology at CalTech, Sperry pioneered an operation for patients with acute epilepsy that severed the bundle of nerve fibers (or corpus callosum) between the upper brain hemispheres. This procedure, which ameliorated but did not cure the sufferers' symptoms, produced an unanticipated side effect: "everything we have seen so far," reports Sperry, "indicates that the surgery has left these people with two separate minds, that is, two separate spheres of consciousness" (299).<sup>1</sup> Parfit appropriates this unexpected consequence as "striking evidence in favour of the Reductionist View" (245). Personal identity, reiterates Parfit, is not what matters; "*what matters is Relation R*," which he defines as "psychological connectedness and/or continuity" (215; emphasis original), where "*psychological connectedness* is the holding of particular direct psychological connections," and "*psychological continuity* is the holding of overlapping chains of *strong* connectedness" (206; emphasis original).<sup>2</sup> This philosophical perspective remains controversial, as Parfit readily admits but rationalizes, because humans are "naturally inclined" (217) to believe that individuals "*are separately existing entities*" owing to some deep further fact. According to the most widespread of these beliefs, either a Cartesian Ego or a soul accounts for a person's distinct existence beyond "his brain and body, and his experiences" (210; emphasis original).

Confronted by this natural inclination, Parfit conducts a series of thought experiments, some of which may be scientifically unrealizable, but all of which help to test Relation R against the criteria of logical necessity and logical sufficiency. Some philosophers dismiss the usefulness of such trials; "this," concedes Parfit, "would have been [Ludwig] Wittgenstein's view" (200). Unlike Wittgenstein, however, Parfit carefully distinguishes between two types of thought experiment: while one sort is "*deeply impossible*," the other sort is "*merely technically impossible*." Parfit, who never resorts to deeply impossible scenarios, illustrates a valid thought experiment with reference to the Einsteinian observer who wonders what "he would see if he could travel beside some beam of light at the speed of light" (219; emphasis original). Parfit's own merely technically impossible

scenarios include teletransportation, body-brain replication, and brains with “no single state of awareness” (250). For reasons of brevity, the present paper must commend without detailed comment the rigorousness of Parfit’s interrogation, an examination that validates his thought experiments with respect to both logical standards; as a corollary, Relation R applies not only “to all people, at all times” (273), but also to the separate consciousnesses within the single brains of Sperry’s postoperative patients.

The implications of Parfit’s contentions for ontological studies are significant, with this importance gaining additional worth for African Americans from the reciprocal inferences triggered by that application, as brought to light by an analysis of Du Bois’s concept of “double consciousness.” Initially advanced in “Strivings of the Negro People,” which appeared in the August 1897 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, Du Bois amended this notion for *The Souls of Black Folk*, which A. C. McClurg first published in 1903, with Du Bois’s modified article serving as chapter 1, under the heading “Of Our Spiritual Strivings.” For Du Bois, “the problem of the Twentieth Century,” as he insists in “The Forethought” to his volume, “is the problem of the color-line” (359), and the personal realization of African-American racial identity stems from the initial enforcement of that demarcation, an imposition that can split, as chapter 1 details, a unified mind into two separate streams of consciousness.

A graduate of Fisk University, Du Bois first met the concept of a stream of consciousness during his studies at Harvard University. He “spent four academic years at Harvard, from the Fall of 1888 through the Spring of 1892,” as James Campbell documents. “The first two years were spent completing a second baccalaureate degree, which he earned cum laude in philosophy in 1890. The third year found Du Bois involved in graduate studies, completing an M.A. in history in 1891.” His final year “was spent in doctoral research” (569). Throughout his time at the university, as Frank C. Worrell chronicles, Du Bois “sought out teachers for whom he had respect” (56), and he especially “reveled in,” as Du Bois’s autobiography makes clear, “the keen analysis of William James, Josiah Royce, and young George Santayana” (148). The order in which du Bois lists these influences reveals something of their relative importance to him; indeed, he “became a devoted follower of James” (133). This commitment led Du Bois to study James’s *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), which reconsiders the visualization of consciousness that James had first mooted in “On Some Omissions of Introspective Psychology”

(January 1884). In this essay for *Mind*, James visualizes consciousness as a “wonderful stream” (2), which comprises both “resting-places” and “places of flight” (3), and although “a good deal” of James’s material for “The Stream of Thought,” which constitutes chapter 8 of *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), is self-admittedly “reprinted from” (1:224 n) his earlier article, much of the new material concerns the appropriateness of this visualization.

“Consciousness,” as James elaborates, “does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. Such words as ‘chain’ or ‘train’ do not describe it fitly as it presents itself in the first instance. It is nothing jointed; it flows. A ‘river’ or a ‘stream’ are [*sic*] the metaphors by which it is most naturally described. In talking of it hereafter,” he counsels, “let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life” (239; emphasis original). What is more, as James stresses in both his original article and his subsequent monograph, consciousness is a function, not a tangible entity. Hence, in denying “the immediate agency of a super-sensible Reason” (4), “On Some Omissions of Introspective Psychology” offers “the fact that a peculiar modification of our subjective feeling corresponds to our awareness of each objective relation, and is the condition of its being known” (4), and *The Principles of Psychology* reemphasizes this conclusion, stating that “no pure act of reason inhabit[s] a supersensible and semi-supernatural plane” (1:478).

By the 1880s, psychology had become an international movement, and academic influences crisscrossed the Atlantic. The intertextual relays between James and Alfred Binet (1857–1911)—whose work alongside that of James’s other major contemporaries in Europe (including Edmund Gurney in England, Pierre Janet and Théodule-Armand Ribot in France, and Carl Stumpf in Germany) Du Bois would have met in attending James’s classes and studying his publications—were notable among these exchanges. In *The Principles of Psychology*, James not only rates Binet’s *The Psychology of Reasoning* (1886) as a “most intelligent little book” (2:327), but also remarks on “victims of that curious dissociation or splitting-off of one part of their consciousness from the rest which we are just beginning to understand, thanks to Messrs. Janet, Binet, and Gurney, and in which the split-off part [. . .] may nevertheless remain to produce its usual effects” (2:520–21 n).<sup>3</sup> French psychologists, “during the past few years,” as the title of Binet’s *On Double Consciousness* (1890) implies, and as Binet therein documents, “have been diligently at work studying the phenomena of double consciousness and double personality in hysterical

individuals” (14).

In contrast, James’s related investigations concern non-hysterical subjects under hypnosis, and his findings suggest that psychologists “look rather towards sleep and dreaming, or towards those deeper alterations of the personality known as automatism, double consciousness, or ‘second’ personality for the true analogues of the hypnotic trance” (2:600). This sole use of the term “double consciousness” in *The Principles of Psychology* unwittingly supports Binet’s wariness in conceding James’s point. That Binet’s extended interrogation of “whether the phenomena of the duplication of consciousness are to be met with in non-hysterical subjects” (80) appears at the end of *On Double Consciousness* confirms this circumspection. “The rudiment of these states of double consciousness which we have studied first in the hysterical” patient, concedes Binet, “may with a little attention be found in normal subjects” (87); yet, unlike James, “I have [. . .] not succeeded in demonstrating double consciousness in healthy as in hysterical subjects” (88).

A carpenter named Ansel Bourne, whose identity changed to that of the itinerant preacher Albert Brown on hearing the Word of God, but who reverted to his original identity thirty years later without any memory of his time under God’s calling, provided the most notable study in James’s *The Principles of Psychology*. The Bourne-Brown case, as Dickson D. Bruce chronicles, “occurred at the same time Du Bois’s relationship with James was at its closest.” Whether the two men discussed the case is speculation, “but based on Du Bois’s use of ‘double consciousness’ in his *Atlantic* essay he certainly seems to have known the term’s psychological background, because he used it in ways quite consistent with that background” (304). Du Bois, then, explicitly supports James’s side of his transatlantic argument, while silently dismissing Binet’s opinion, and he remains committed to this opinion in *The Souls of Black Folk*.

What Du Bois calls the “peculiar sensation” of African-American “double-consciousness” (“Strivings 194; *Souls* 364) is not a matter of “hysteria,” a term that alongside its conjugations earns no place in either of Du Bois’s texts; rather, double consciousness derives from the psychological watershed elicited from the traumatic imposition of a supposedly inferior racial identity onto a previously healthy subject. After this unexpected, sudden, and divisive event, and as Parfit states of Sperry’s postsurgical patients, “each of these two streams separately displays unity of consciousness.” Each stream conforms to Relation R both retrospectively and prospectively, and although “this may be a surprising fact,” as Parfit

acknowledges, “we can understand it. We can come to believe that a person’s mental history need not be like a canal, with only one channel, but could be like a river, occasionally having separate streams” (247). The realization of African-American identity and the postoperative awakening of Sperry’s patients can be of a similar magnitude.

Du Bois’s appeal to the spiritual—the titular invocation in *The Souls of Black Folk* and his recourse to “two souls” (364) when describing the “peculiar sensation” of “double-consciousness”—does not undercut this conclusion; Du Bois, as an appeal to Parfit indicates, is naturally inclined to believe that some deep further fact accounts for personal identity. Two factors supported this inclination. On the one hand, despite his “wholesome respect for common sense,” as Richard M. Gale remarks, James establishes disciplinary tenets and categories for pragmatism that are admittedly open “to revision and often are the repositories for past metaphysical theories” (225), and the philosophical thoughts of James’s followers were similarly welcoming. On the other hand, that racists often rationalize bigotry in an essentialist manner, insisting that they appeal to a racial hierarchy that is biologically determined, salted Du Bois’s essentially psychological approach to race with an unnecessary (but accountable) dash of metaphysics.

Thus, as Du Bois’s final thesis in *The Souls of Black Folk* unambiguously posits, an African American who has newly confronted the concept of race can be numerically identical but qualitatively different to the person that went before—and an intimate aspect of that difference is consciousness. “One might say,” as Parfit does of someone who has had a serious accident, “‘he is no longer the same person.’ This is a claim about both kinds of identity. We claim that *he*, the same [numerical] person, is *not* now the same [qualitative] person. This is not a contradiction” (201; emphasis original). The parallel inference that results from reading *The Souls of Black Folk* from a reductionist perspective, which places a physical accident alongside a psychological one, insists that psychological trauma alone can split a hitherto unitary consciousness.

The watershed event productive of African-American double consciousness—an intentional incident from the instigator’s standpoint; an imposition from without for the targeted individual—occurs almost invariably during childhood. “It is in the early days of rollicking boyhood that the revelation first bursts upon one,” insists Du Bois, “all in a day, as it were.” Significantly, however, in moving from the impersonal to the personal, Du Bois recounts his own experience of this event as

a passing psychological shadow (or eclipse) rather than as a permanent division of unitary consciousness (or schism). “I remember well when the shadow swept across me” (363). In Great Barrington, Massachusetts, “in a wee wooden schoolhouse, something put it into the boys’ and girls’ heads to buy gorgeous visiting-cards—ten cents a package—and exchange. The exchange was merry, till one girl, a tall newcomer, refused my card,—refused it peremptorily, with a glance” (363–64). The young Du Bois, expecting the reciprocal gesture he has already experienced on a number of occasions, unguardedly approaches the newcomer, but she, as the mention of her height implies, looks down on him with disdain. Whether she has recently arrived from the Unreconstructed South or not, the newcomer renounces the boy according to her notions of racial construction, thereby essentially misrecognizing him as her inferior.<sup>4</sup>

Du Bois’s oppressive shadow, however, is not the extreme and common expression of racial dawning. “The shades of the prison-house closed round about us all,” but “with other black boys the strife was not so fiercely sunny” as with Du Bois, who still “lived above” (364) the watershed, which he calls the “Veil” (359). Thereafter, as a silently and self-appointed member of the “Talented Tenth” (435)—“who through their knowledge of modern culture,” as he explains in *Dusk of Dawn* (1940), “could guide the American Negro into a higher civilization” (604)—Du Bois could give what most African Americans could not: undivided attention to the existence of double consciousness. Du Bois suggests this personal ability by his skillful avoidance of begging the question. “*One*,” rather than Du Bois, “ever feels his two-ness” (364; emphasis added). From his singular point of view, Du Bois appreciates the production of this phenomenon as a manifold event, one that leaves psychological facets of a positive as well as a negative character.

On the positive side of psychological splitting, each of the resultant consciousnesses enjoys psychological continuity with the single consciousness that went before, and this connection affords not only an African-American perspective, but also an American one. “After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian,” writes Du Bois, “the Negro is a sort of seventh son.” Psychological continuity with the single consciousness that went before provides an African American “with second-sight in this American world.” On the negative side of psychological splitting, this process “yields him no true self-consciousness” (364). The imposition of the “color line” (438), across which the talented Du Bois can “move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas” and can “sit with Shakespeare” (438), establishes that

demarcation as a hierarchical construct.

Thus, when the tall newcomer looks down on the young Du Bois, her intended victim registers this attempt at marginalization. The mature Du Bois can then explain how this imposition often succeeds in casting American consciousness above its African-American counterpart, with the resultant psyche replicating the hierarchical construct intended by the color line. That neither direct nor transitive relations exist between the consciousnesses of a racially split mind adds another degree of intricacy to the contradictory nature of the resultant psychological state. The gap between the two consciousnesses is not directly bridgeable. Nor can either stream of thought backtrack to its unitary source and then transitively extend that link into the other consciousness. Each stream is aware of both a numerically unchanged life and a psychologically changed mind, but neither consciousness is able to access the workings of its counterpart.

The attempt at marginalization, therefore, does not totally succeed. For, despite the hierarchical construction intended by the color line, and despite a legacy from slavery that equated African Americans with beasts of burden, these two consciousnesses do not transform their subject into a human form of Buridan's ass. Named after the scholastic philosopher Jean Buridan's reading of a dilemma from Aristotle's *On the Heavens*, this victim of paradox "starved to death between two equally nourishing bales of hay," as Parfit relates. "This ass had no reason to eat one of these bales of hay before eating the other" (258). The beast simply refused to choose. Asinine minds might fall prey to such contingencies, but as James asserts in "The Dilemma of Determinism" (1884), "antipathy to the idea of chance" (153) does not characterize human cognition.

"The Dilemma of Determinism," which mounts what Robert Richardson describes as "a dazzling attack on those who claim (and they still do) that everything we do is determined by forces outside our control" (xiii), must have particularly appealed to the Jamesian in Du Bois, which denied African-American enslavement to the notional antipathy to chance, as must James's contradistinctive analogy, which appears in "The Will to Believe" (1896):

Suppose, for instance, that you are climbing a mountain, and have worked yourself into a position from which the only escape is by a terrible leap. Have faith that you can successfully make

it, and your feet are nerved to its accomplishment. But mistrust yourself, and think of all the sweet things you have heard the scientists say of *maybes*, and you will hesitate so long that, at last, all unstrung and trembling, and launching yourself in a moment of despair, you roll in the abyss. In such a case (and it belongs to an enormous class), the part of wisdom as well as of courage is to *believe what is in the line of your needs*, for only by such belief is the need fulfilled. Refuse to believe, and you shall indeed be right, for you shall irretrievably perish. (59; emphasis original)

In Du Bois's opinion, the socioeconomic conditions of racialized America demand the wisdom and courage from the Talented Tenth to believe what is in the line of African-American needs. That ratiocinative surety must recognize not only the racial miscasting that continues to produce individuals numerically identical yet qualitatively different from the individuals who went before, but also the attendant asymmetric pressure that produces a dynamic rather than a static difference between that individual's two consciousnesses. "If a mind was permanently divided, and its halves developed in different ways," as Parfit muses, "it would become less plausible to claim that the case involves only one person" (256). In Du Bois's model, many African Americans have two streams of consciousness, with the unmediated original flowing below that mediated through the eyes of Americans, and schizophrenia (Du Bois's sense of "two warring ideals" [364]) rather than Binetian hysteria expresses this double consciousness, with the problem of numerical unity (Du Bois's sense of "two warring ideals in one dark body" [364–65]) promoting the solution of passive or active suicide (Du Bois's sense of "two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" [364–65]). Owing to their mutual isolation, these two consciousnesses are equivalent to two players in a game of strategy, where the coordination condition of silence demands that each player defects or cooperates in ignorance of the other player's choice between defection and cooperation. For Du Bois, the phenomenon of double consciousness is a matter of homeostasis: the numerically identical person can function effectively (if not efficiently), but he is qualitatively different from the person that went before; physical integument rather than mental strength maintains numerical identical.

As the scientifically informed philosophy of the preceding argument indicates, Du Bois's conception of double-consciousness has extremely complex ramifications, yet critics of African-American literature

have tended to avoid casting his notion in terms of either utilitarian philosophy or cognitive epistemology. Instead, as Adolph Reed traces, the related history of academic appropriations “have clustered around three ideological programs: an integrationist-therapeutic motive from the 1920s to the mid-1960s, a nationalist-therapeutic one from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s, and an academic race-celebratory one since” (92). Each of these approaches lets Du Bois down.

The first phase of appropriation, as characterized by Everett V. Stonequist and St. Clair Drake, emphasized the marginalization and psychological harm that resulted from ambivalent loyalties. For Stonequist, who reads double consciousness in terms of geographically envired pangenesi, Du Bois’s “peculiar feeling” plagues “the Northern mulatto” (265), whose “identification with the white race has been more complete” than his Southern counterpart’s has been. In “consequence,” reasons Stonequist, “that failure of full acceptance has been more disturbing. He has experienced acute mental conflicts about his racial status” (266). To Drake, the strain of trying to conform to both African-American and American standards “generates distorted perceptions of the total society and occasionally bizarre definitions of situations, but it also results in cognitive crippling” (131). That debilitation, however, applies to a unified (rather than to a bifurcated) consciousness.

The second phase of appropriation, as characterized by Carol B. Stack, John O’Neal, and Huston A. Baker, shifted the normative function of Du Bois’s postulation. For Stack, the notion of double consciousness no longer entertained the prospect of idealized American goals; rather, it represented “the conflicting and warring identities between being a Black and an American in a white world” (26). For O’Neal, “color” was “a cultural, social and political fact” (53). For Baker, “the sense of ‘twoness’ that Du Bois handles so skillfully in *The Souls of Black Folk* is fast disappearing as cultural nationalism grows stronger. The doubts, speculations, and reflections are falling into a clear and ordered pattern, and we realize that America is something apart” (17). The black nationalism of Stack and O’Neal hereby found a counterpart in Baker’s reversion to the model of American exceptionalism.

The third phase of appropriation, as characterized by Manning Marable and Bettye J. Gardner, emerged from the institutionalization of African-American studies. These critics celebrate, without interrogating in scientifically informed terms, the essentialist inherence of double consciousness. While Marable acknowledges double consciousness as

“the basis of the struggle to attack institutionalized racism” (56), Gardner credits the condition for “the study and teaching of Afro-American history” (172).

Reed’s own addition to this history of appropriation understands the notion of double consciousness to have flourished in a historically contingent niche. “Two-ness, or ‘alienage,’” he contends, became “prominent among fin-de-siècle American intellectuals” (107). Yet, in analyzing “what led so many of them to find the specific image of fragmented consciousness a compelling metaphor for their own circumstances” (107), Reed not only shifts the focus on double consciousness from African Americans to Americans in general, but also imposes a postmodern notion of conscious fragmentation onto the period of proto-modernity. In contrast to these unfortunate changes, the Du Bois of fin-de-siècle America posits a division of consciousness into two asymmetric or unequal streams, rather than a fragmentation of that function. Certainly, African-American double consciousness is historically contingent, but that contingency does not deny the lived effects of dividing a hitherto unitary stream of consciousness.

Postdating Reed’s history, the latest phase of academic appropriation, which Paul C. Mocombe, Robert Gooding-Williams, and Frank M. Kirkland characterize, does concern Du Bois’s “peculiar sensation” as a stream of consciousness. In *The Soul-less Souls of Black Folk* (2009), Mocombe laments Du Bois’s failure to “articulate the sociohistorical nature of all black practical consciousness or identity” (58), arguing that the “ambivalent estrangement” of which Du Bois writes concerns a particular group of African Americans: liberals who strive for bourgeois status in a country where the bourgeoisie have effectively denied that social standing to them. While Mocombe’s work has considerable merit in attributing double consciousness to a subset of African Americans, his understanding of Du Bois’s concept is mistaken on two fronts. On the one hand, Mocombe’s explanation amounts to a pair of social constructs contesting for the full attention of a single mind, instead of two consciousnesses vying for strategic control of a single brain. On the other hand, he attributes double consciousness to Du Bois’s Talented Tenth rather than to members of Du Bois’s African-American majority—an error that occurs if one mistakenly takes Du Bois to imply that most African Americans are talentless.

An interpretation of double consciousness is central to Gooding-Williams’s *In the Shadow of Du Bois* (2010). “In the extensive scholarship

on double consciousness,” as Gooding-Williams observes, “it is not frequently remarked that Du Bois characterizes double consciousness as a sensation” (79). Kirkland, as “On Du Bois’ Notion of Double Consciousness” (2013) reveals, agrees with Gooding-Williams. Academics often forget that “‘double consciousness’ for Du Bois is taken as a conflicted psychological disposition or state of mind” (137). In Du Bois’s hypothesis, maintains Kirkland, the “peculiar sensation” of double consciousness results from “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” (139; emphasis original). Du Bois falls short, however, in showing “how ‘double consciousness’ as a ‘kind of feeling’ intimates” (139) the second part (clause b) of his hypothesis. What is more, believes Kirkland, Gooding-Williams, commits the same explanatory error.

Keeping this failure in mind, and drawing on a definition he first posited in “Modernity and Intellectual Life in Black” (1997), Kirkland interprets and supports Du Bois’s notion as a matter of “*dyadic*” (151; emphasis original) negotiation. For Kirkland, Du Bois provides “three related yet distinct senses” of double consciousness, “two lying on the negative side, and the third lying on positive side” (151). The “least prominent sense is double consciousness as *duplicitous* in which ‘one looks at one’s self through the eyes of others or measures one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.’” This negative case “leads one to a false self-interpretation constitutive of a false kind of life, thwarting an authentic self-presentation.” The “most prominent sense is double consciousness as *dualistic* and *duellistic*, in which ‘the contradiction of double aims’ predominates.” In this negative instance, “double consciousness produces disorientation, competing ideals, irreconcilable strivings, all of which yield a kind of *self-doubt*.” The moderately prominent sense of double consciousness is “*dyadic*” in form. This positive case “represents for Du Bois the ‘merging’” of a “double self into a better and truer self’ without losing its twofold character of being both an African and an American” (151; emphasis original). Kirkland’s preference, as his later essay emphasizes, is for the term “‘*dyadic*’ rather than ‘synthetic,’” because he takes Du Bois “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” (146 n.24).

Notwithstanding the thoroughness of Kirkland’s approach, translating his

three senses of Du Bois's concept into functions of consciousness provides a radically different interpretation. The self-duplicitous sense involves one stream of consciousness in reflexive mode, and the remaining two senses, as different expressions of double consciousness, point to further interpretative difficulties. The conjunction between dualistic "and" duellistic makes for exclusive antagonism, yet dualism need not invoke duellism: opposition between streams of thought would produce a merged (as in homogenized) response, but one stream of thought might coincide with its complement, or a dominant stream of thought might register no response from its recessive counterpart. Furthermore, in folding double consciousness into a sentient rather than a conscious middle ground, Kirkland deepens the confusion that striates his model: what amounts to a poststructuralist move, which would normally help to disseminate an interpretative proliferation with regard to its subject, confines two conscious functions within a single feeling.

Reading double consciousness through the reductionist lens of Relation R, as supplied by Parfit's utilitarian philosophy and supported by Sperry's neurosurgical findings, provides a means of addressing both the general dearth of scientifically informed readings of Du Bois's "peculiar sensation" and Kirkland's scientifically misinformed interpretation. This innovative approach also highlights Du Bois's twofold desire for the African American who has experienced the watershed event of double consciousness "to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self," without losing either of his "older selves." Du Bois "would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. 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. 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" (365). For Du Bois, therefore, the majority of African Americans are not talentless; indeed, many of them possess what he can only hypothesize: a form of double perception.

Du Bois's initial step toward accomplishing his deceptively (some might say "naively") simple wish is to write; the Du Boisian writing process recalls aspects of Parfit's "Physics Exam"; this thought experiment draws on Sperry's experimental test for the bifurcation of consciousness experienced by his postsurgical patients; and this experiment evokes those aspects of Binet's work with which James and his students would have been cognizant. During his "Physics Exam," Parfit has "only fifteen

minutes left in which to answer the last question. It occurs to me that there are two ways of tackling this question. I am unsure which is more likely to succeed. I therefore decide to divide my mind for ten minutes, to work in each half of my mind on one of the two calculations, and then to reunite my mind to write a fair copy of the best result" (246–47). Philosopher of science Richard Swinburne neatly summarizes Sperry's related postoperative experiment:

suppose you present to one such person a tray containing miscellaneous items and ask that person to pick out those described on cards presented to them. Among the items on the tray are a key, a ring, and a key ring. You present to him the card reading "KEY RING," but in such a way that the first word "KEY" is visible only to his left visual field, and "RING" is visible only to his right visual field. He then ignores the key ring, but picks out the key with his left hand and the ring with his right hand. (146)<sup>5</sup>

Both Parfit's thought experiment and Sperry's postsurgical test cater to the watershed event of double consciousness. The shielding that facilitates this accommodation recalls Binet's examination of hysterical patients. "In order to test his theory of double consciousness," chronicles Felipe Smith, "Binet used a screen to block his subjects from seeing what their hands or other anesthetic body parts were doing." Concealed by his screen, "Binet would induce activity in the affected body parts" (389 n.71). To Binet's delight, as recounted in *On Double Consciousness*, "the sensations and movements of the anaesthetic limb, by grouping themselves together, formed a second consciousness" (57). Du Boisian terminology in *The Souls of Black Folk* translates Binet's screen into the "Veil" (or watershed). The entry into double consciousness precipitates a lack of accurate self-perception. "In this sense of self-veiling," confirms Smith, "Du Bois's trope has an analogue in Binet's studies on double consciousness" (389 n.71); that comparison finds similar parallels in Parfit's and Sperry's work; and these analogues collectively deny Ernest Allen's assertion that Du Bois's notion of double consciousness "not only fails the test of internal logic but that of empirical verification as well" (235).

Parfit's thought experiment relies on ambidexterity. Each hand writes down the thoughts of its controlling stream of consciousness. "In both of my streams," maintains Parfit, "I know that I am now having thoughts and sensations in my other stream. But in each stream I am unaware of my thoughts and sensations in my other stream" (288). Du Bois,

according to biographical record, was not ambidextrous, and his writing experiment relies on diachronic rather than synchronic thought. The two consciousnesses in Parfit's single brain "communicate in a public way. I might in one stream write a letter to myself in my other stream. With one hand I would then place this letter in my other hand" (288). Du Bois furthers his deceptively simple wish to express and accommodate the double self-consciousness of the African-American majority by dividing his public communication into two successive steps. His next task after writing is to rewrite. This concluding step provides each of the consciousnesses he envisages with a retrospective appreciation of its conscious complement.

The literary provenance of *The Souls of Black Folk* traces this two-stage process at the formal level, with eight of the fourteen chapters amended from previously published articles.<sup>6</sup> The bifurcation of form common to each chapter—and one of the immediately recognizable emendations to the original articles that contribute to *The Souls of Black Folk*—additionally testifies to Du Bois's creative negotiations. Each chapter opens with a poetic quotation followed by a musically notated excerpt from an African-American sorrow song. From the perspective of an American stream of consciousness, the chirographic technology of reason assumes preeminence over the vernacular expression of thought, not only coming first on the page, but also translating an oral form into written notation.<sup>7</sup> From the perspective of an African-American stream of consciousness, the inclusion of a sorrow song, however expressed, produces a complementary confusion of the senses: reading/singing the poetic epigraph parallels hearing/reading the epigraphic music; as a corollary, the synaesthetic interpretations of *The Souls of Black Folk* undertaken by critics including Anne E. Carroll and Steve Andrews gain support from a scientifically informed appreciation of Du Boisian double consciousness.

In narrative terms, Du Bois's creative negotiations come most explicitly to the fore with one of the pieces written especially for *The Souls of Black Folk*, the short story that comprises chapter 13, "Of the Coming of John." Titular expectation concerns a single character, a singular John, but the narrative actually concerns two Johns, as the name of their shared birthplace in the Unreconstructed South, Johnstown, intimates. Before the watershed of race intervenes, "playmates" (524) John Jones and John Henderson are numerically different but qualitatively equivalent in each other's estimation. After this intervention, the African-American Jones and the American Henderson are aware that ruling social norms

cast them as numerically *and* qualitatively different. That Jones is the protagonist while Jones's former playmate plays a secondary role is a defiant authorial strategy that inverts this qualitative demarcation. Du Bois supports this inversion by casting Jones as a member of the Talented Tenth and Henderson as the son of a local judge. While the unmediated stream of consciousness flows below the mediated one in the double consciousness of a racially traumatized African American, as Du Bois's formulation of the watershed of race makes clear, Jones's unitary consciousness takes precedence over Henderson's corresponding stream

Jones's mother recognizes her son's potential talent before he does. She sends him to college, where at first he fails, but at last succeeds. This educational process provides Jones with a command of modern culture in line with Du Bois's philosophy. He can act as a cultural guide for the African-American majority. That Henderson concurrently attends Princeton University (523) places the two Johns, like their separate streams of consciousness, on separate but parallel courses. The eventual conflux of these streams, however, is predictably turbulent. The day following Jones's graduation encompasses Du Bois's figurative attempt to merge these two consciousnesses. At the New York Metropolitan Opera House, the two Johns practically bump into each other, when John Jones, standing "stock-still amazed" at having paid five dollars for a seat, unintentionally blocks the auditorium doors. "'Be careful,' said a low voice behind him; 'you must not lynch the colored gentleman simply because he's in your way,' and a girl looked up roguishly into the eyes of her fair-haired escort." That escort is Jones's former playmate. "One never sees in the North," continues John Henderson, "so cordial and intimate relations between white and black as are everyday occurrences with us" in the South. Nonetheless, Henderson's mood changes abruptly when the young couple reach their seats, with Henderson "stopp[ing] short and flush[ing] to the roots of his hair, for there directly beside his reserved orchestra chairs sat the Negro he had stumbled over in the hallway" (526).

By sitting in adjacent seats at the opera, the two Johns would occupy numerically different but qualitatively identical spaces, and that qualitative identity is of a cultural nature. Du Bois's double figuration adumbrates that the two unmediated streams of consciousness have the power to erode the social barrier between them. However, by asking an attendant to reseat what he deems a racial parvenu, Henderson immediately eliminates this potential. A reactionary understanding of identity effectively insists that the hierarchical construct of race

supplements the double consciousness instinctively assumed of the upstart in question. The revolutionary Jones, who “did not for some time notice the usher tapping him lightly on the shoulder and saying politely, ‘Will you step this way, please, sir?’” is initially oblivious to Henderson’s demand. Then,

a little surprised, he arose quickly at the last tap, and, turning to leave his seat, looked full into the face of the fair-haired young man. For the first time the young man recognized his dark boyhood playmate, and John knew that it was the Judge’s son. The white John started, lifted his hand, and then froze into his chair; the black John smiled lightly, then grimly, and followed the usher down the aisle. The manager was sorry [. . .] some mistake had been made in selling the gentleman a seat already disposed of; he would refund the money, of course. (527)

The reciprocal and mutually interrupted gestures of the two Johns recapitulate the watershed event productive of double consciousness in traumatized African Americans. Jones both accepts and declines this recapitulation. In the first instance, he immediately leaves the opera house, thereby consciously forfeiting his refund. In the second instance, he returns to his hometown, visiting Judge Henderson’s “house to ask for the privilege of teaching the Negro school” (531).

The judge grants his request, but the hierarchical construct of race almost immediately intervenes to disrupt Jones’s mission. “Heah that John is livenin’ things up at the darky school,” volunteers the postmaster to Judge Henderson one morning. “What now?” the Judge asks. To which the postmaster replies, “Oh, nothin’ in particulah,—just his almighty air and uppish ways” (532). From an American perspective, Jones’s uppishness intimates his attempt to raise the lower, unmediated stream of double consciousness that each of his pupil’s supposedly possesses, and such a promotion threatens to dismantle the asymmetric preeminence enjoyed by the unmediated stream of American consciousness. Schools for African Americans, as Du Bois’s visiting-card incident during childhood eventually taught him, and as the existence of such American institutions intends, should reinforce, if not implement, the watershed of double consciousness. The judge, inculcated to believe in the African-American defiance of this intention, closes Jones’s school without further consideration.

This closure, which blocks a revolutionary stream of consciousness with the impedimenta of a reactionary one, leaves Du Bois with a single figurative option, which he effectively follows by permanently damming both streams with a double murder: John Jones kills John Henderson for what he interprets as Henderson's attempted rape of Jennie Jones (his sister); this murder, of course, provokes another killing, with a mob,

headed by Judge Henderson, lynching John Jones. Hence, according to a figurative extrapolation that cannot help but posit the funereal symbolism of "earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust," Du Bois collapses the numerically different Joneses into a twofold equivalence. Double consciousness, which Du Bois has not experienced but can fully imagine, returns to its unitary origin. This response to the concept of double consciousness, which draws on contemporary psychology, but which is ahead of its time, is both Jamesian and Parfitian; indeed, Du Bois's response provides an extended thought experiment that supports Parfit's reductionist claims.

Although Parfit does not reference James in *Reasons and Persons*, and cites him only once in *On What Matters* (2011), and then in a comment on Sidgwick's self-reflective frankness that has no relevance to a discussion of double consciousness, James's challenge to the accepted standard of selfhood certainly prefigures Parfit's similarly oriented move. "It would not be wildly anachronistic," concurs Richard M. Gale, "to see [James's] attempt to analyze Self identity in terms of distinctive sort[s] of emotions, attitudes, and actions that give importance to Self identity as a forerunner of Derek Parfit's account." James's pragmatic and Parfit's utilitarian approaches "pare off from the bare numerical identity of common sense those importance-bestowing features that are its almost invariable but contingent accompaniments and replace the former by the latter." Different stances justify the two philosophers' departures from commonsense morality—James's tendency is toward an ethical imperative; Parfit's tendency is toward an altruistic impersonality—but their constituting streams of thought come together when the issue concerns an individual who has undergone "a psychological upheaval that results in a radical difference in the way in which he remembers and evaluates the importance of things" (224).

Gale fails to mention, however, an important difference maintained by this rapprochement. In *The Principles of Psychology*, James argues that the victim of a radical disruption in psychological continuity "disowns his former me, gives himself a new name, [and] identifies his present

life with nothing from out of the older time” (1:336). In contrast, Parfit’s scientifically informed loyalty to Relation R insists that each consciousness in a traumatically bifurcated mind maintains psychological connectedness and/or continuity with its unitary source, a fidelity that the Du Bois of the “Strivings of the Negro People” and *The Souls of Black Folk*, in advance of his erstwhile mentor James, prefiguratively and effectively shared.

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## Notes

- 1 Sperry's work would earn him the 1981 Nobel Prize for Physiology-Medicine.
- 2 One must note, however, that Parfit issues a warning to those who follow his lead. "It may be thought that, if this is so, we ought to give to R the importance that we now give to personal identity. This does not follow" (272). R replaces the concept of personal identity, but R demands less importance in the reductionist paradigm than personal identity does in its non-reductionist counterparts.
- 3 In their turn, as Sam Halliday chronicles, these French psychologists had drawn on the work of the American physician and naturalist Samuel L. Mitchell. "Although the term 'double consciousness' owes much of its currency to literary sources," observes Halliday, "its entrance into psychotherapeutic discourse may be traced to Samuel L. Mitchell's 'A Double Consciousness, or a Duality of Person in the Same Individual' (1817)" (180).
- 4 Students of African-American literature will recall other such misrecognitions. In James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), for example, racial revelation is even more shocking because the protagonist has been unwittingly passing for white. "One day near the end of my second term at school," recounts the narrator, "the principal came into our room, and after talking to the teacher, for some reason said, 'I wish all of the white scholars to stand for a moment.' I rose with the others," recalls the narrator. "The teacher looked at me, and calling my name said, 'You sit down for the present, and rise with the others.' I did not quite understand her, and questioned, 'Ma'm?' She repeated with a softer tone in her voice, 'You sit down now, and rise with the others.' I sat down dazed. I saw and heard nothing. When the others were asked to rise I did not know it" (12). Intriguingly, "when we pass beyond alterations of memory to abnormal alterations in the present self," as *The Principles of Psychology* reveals, James's understanding of altered states of consciousness speaks to Johnson's Ex-Colored Man. "These alterations are of three main types," enumerates James: "(1) Insane delusions; (2) Alternating selves; (3) Mediumships or possessions" (375). The second of these categories comes closest to Du Bois's notion of double consciousness, but this proximity is one of

titular expectation rather than actual closeness, with James's notion of alternating selves even somewhat isolated from Johnson's concept of switching consciousnesses in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. "The phenomenon of alternating personality in its simplest phases seems based on lapses of memory," writes James. "Any man becomes, as we say, *inconsistent* with himself if he forgets his engagements, pledges, knowledges, and habits; and it is merely a question of degree at what point we shall say that his personality is changed" (379; emphasis original). In a more complex phase of the phenomenon of alternating personality, "in which the secondary character is superior to the first, there seems reason to think that the first one is the morbid one. The word inhibition describes its dulness [*sic*] and melancholy" (384).

5 Importantly, Swinburne provides subsequent alternatives to the model of two consciousnesses supported by Sperry and Parfit, alternatives that might prove equally rewarding to African-American studies. "One is that the subject has only one consciousness, sustained by the left hemisphere; the severing of the corpus callosum frees many of his or her patterns of response (e.g. those of the left hand in typical split-brain experiments) from conscious control. These responses," maintains Swinburne, "then become as automatic as are many of the movements of my limbs when I am driving a car and talking about philosophy at the same time. Another interpretation, advocated by [D. M.] Mackay" (146), reports Swinburne, "is that there remains a single consciousness sustained by both hemispheres; and that the disunity of response is (to use Tim Bayne's terminology) only 'access disunity.' Yet another interpretation is Bayne's 'switch model,'" which promotes itself as a scientifically inflected response to Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, an analogous update to that implicitly performed by Parfit on James's model, in which "consciousness in the split-brain switches between the subject's two hemispheres" (147). The right hemisphere sometimes takes over from the normally predominant left in giving rise to consciousness. The model suggested by Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* implies that sociopolitical environing imparts an asymmetric character to African-American double consciousness. In short, racism is forever invoking the African-American consciousness *in favor of* the American consciousness, with the later being responsive but unstimulated.

6

Chapter in <i>Souls</i>	Originally Published under the Title	Original Source	Month	Year
1	"Strivings of the Negro People"	<i>The Atlantic Monthly</i>	August	1897
2	"The Freedmen's Bureau"	<i>The Atlantic Monthly</i>	March	1901

3	“The Evolution of Negro Leadership”	<i>The Dial</i>	July	1901
4	“A Negro Schoolmaster in the New South”	<i>The Atlantic Monthly</i>	January	1899
6	“Of the Training of Black Men”	<i>The Atlantic Monthly</i>	September	1902
7	“The Negro as He Really Is”	<i>The World’s Work</i>	June	1901
9	“The Relation of the Negroes to the Whites in the South”	<i>Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science</i>	July	1901
10	“The Religion of the American Negro”	<i>New World</i>	December	1900

Figure 1: Table Detailing the Previously Published Chapters in *The Souls of Black Folk*

7 What is more, and as Du Bois surely intends, all but one of these poetic fragments, which include one piece each by Arthur Symons, Lord Byron, Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller, and two pieces by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, come from the Western canon. The exception appears at the opening of chapter 6, “Of the Training of Black Men,” with the quotation translated by Edward FitzGerald from *The Rubaiyat* (1120) of Omar Khayyam. A rounded education, suggests Du Bois, must partake of Eastern as well as Western wisdom.