

“Two-ness,” Identity, and Agency in Du Bois’s *Souls*

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ABSTRACT

“Double-consciousness” is arguably W. E. B. Du Bois’s most famous contribution to social thought and has generated a staggering amount of philosophical debate. However, in *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois introduces not just double-consciousness but the distinct concept of “two-ness.” And two-ness is philosophically interesting independent of its relation to double-consciousness. Du Bois commentators, though, have paid little attention to two-ness, either (a) identifying it with double-consciousness or (b) distinguishing the two concepts but focusing almost solely on double-consciousness.

In this paper, I will argue that two-ness is distinct from double-consciousness and that once we clearly distinguish two-ness from double-consciousness, we gain an important insight from analyzing two-ness on its own terms in Du Bois’s early thought. The concept of two-ness helps us see that the challenge that many non-White Americans face in attempting to embrace their American identity is a challenge to their self-respect: they can neither embrace nor reject their American identity without disrespecting themselves. Du Bois’s solution to two-ness involves non-White Americans contesting, negotiating, and reinterpreting their racial identities so that they can reshape problematic American ideals into ideals they can endorse without disrespecting themselves. My interpretation has important ramifications for Du Bois exegesis, political philosophy, and anti-racist politics.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

Many non-White Americans report experiencing a conflict between their American and racial identities. In this paper, I shed light on the nature of this conflict by engaging with the early writings of Black American scholar and activist W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963). In particular, I focus on his concept of “two-ness,” which he introduces alongside the more famous concept of “double-consciousness” in his 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk*. The concept of two-ness helps us see that the challenge many non-White Americans face in attempting to embrace their American identity is a challenge to their self-respect: they can neither embrace nor reject their American identity without disrespecting themselves. Du Bois’s solution to this challenge involves non-White Americans reshaping their identities into ones that they can embrace without disrespecting themselves. This has important upshots for anti-racist politics.

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Introduction

In 2020, following several high-profile deaths of Black Americans including Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, National Public Radio asked its Black listeners to comment on their own experiences of being Black in America. One of the responses NPR received came from Glenn Smith, a Black resident of Brooklyn, who said, “I cried because I realized how proud I am to be an American, a New Yorker, and a Brooklynite. I cried because in those feelings of pride, I’m faced with feelings of contradiction. Why are cops brutally killing people that look like me?” (Peters 2020). Like Smith, many Black Americans report experiencing a conflict between their American and racial identities (*All Things Considered* 2020; Beamer 2021; Johnson 2018; Peters 2020; Summers 2020), as do many Asian Americans (Cowan 2021; Ruiz et al. 2023; Xu 2016), Latino Americans (Flores-González 2017), and Native Americans (Malika et al. 2024).

The canonical philosophical discussion on conflicting racial or national identities appears in academic and activist W. E. B. Du Bois’s ([1903a] 1997) book *The Souls of Black Folk*, which contains what one commentator suspects is “the most frequently cited paragraph in the history of African American thought and letters” (Gooding-Williams 2009, 77). The paragraph reads in part:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others. . . . One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois [1903a] 1997, 38)

“Double-consciousness” is arguably Du Bois’s most famous contribution to social thought and has generated a staggering amount of philosophical debate.¹ However, in the passage above, Du Bois introduces not just one but two concepts: double-consciousness and “two-ness.” Two-ness is philosophically interesting independent of its relation to double-consciousness. Du Bois commentators, though, have paid little attention to two-ness, either (a) identifying it with double-consciousness or (b) distinguishing the two concepts but focusing on double-consciousness.

In this paper, I will argue that two-ness is distinct from double-consciousness and that once we clearly distinguish these concepts, we gain at least two important insights from analyzing two-ness on its own terms in Du Bois’s early thought.² First, the concept of two-ness helps us see that the challenge that Glenn Smith and many non-White Americans face in attempting to embrace their American identity is a challenge to their *self-respect*. Second, focusing on two-ness illuminates one way in which they can use their racial identity to overcome this challenge and restore their self-respect.

¹ Gooding-Williams (2009), Kirkland (2013), Pittman (2016), and Taylor (2010) each describe double-consciousness as Du Bois’s best-known contribution, as indicated by the substantial attention it has received in the humanities and social sciences. A sampling of philosophical discussions on Du Bois’s conception of double-consciousness, in chronological order, include: Rampersad (1976, 73–74), Williamson (1984, 400–5), West (1989, 138–50), Holt (1990), Early (1993), Gilroy (1993, 111–45), Lewis (1993, 96, 279–83), Sundquist (1993, 457–625), Adell (1994, 11–19), Zamir (1995, 113–68), Reed (1997), Balfour (1998), Allen (2002), Henry (2005), Owen (2007), Gordon (2008), Gooding-Williams (2009), Balfour (2011), Kirkland (2013), Shaw (2013), Basevich (2022), and Hawkins and Davis (2024).

² Since my focus is Du Bois’s account of two-ness in *Souls*, I will rely on textual evidence from works he produced between 1894 and 1906. One reason for this approach is practical: Du Bois’s corpus is massive. The other, more important reason is that his thought changed significantly over the course of his lifetime. By restricting my primary sources to his early corpus, I reduce the risk of distorting the text with interpretations based on his later ideas. Since nine of *Souls*’ fourteen chapters had been previously published when Du Bois revised and compiled them for the book, it makes sense to consider other contemporaneous works. Moreover, it’s unlikely that his thought changed much in the few years immediately following the publication of *Souls*.

My discussion will proceed as follows. In §1, I will argue that a careful reading of *Souls* reveals that double-consciousness and two-ness are distinct concepts. In §2, *contra* some commentators like Ernest Allen, Jr., (2002), I will argue that Du Bois's notion of two-ness illuminates a major source of the feelings of contradiction that Glenn Smith and many other non-White Americans experience. Namely, their experience of two-ness consists in a dilemma of disrespect: they can neither embrace nor reject their American identity without disrespecting themselves. In §3, I will argue that Du Bois's characterization of two-ness suggests that he thinks non-White Americans can reshape their old identities and thereby bring new identities into being, ones which they can embrace without disrespecting themselves. In §4, I will elaborate on the distinction between two-ness and double-consciousness, showing how my reading of Du Bois differs from and complements readings that focus on double-consciousness, like Robert Gooding-Williams's (2009). I will conclude by discussing the broader ramifications of my reading for Du Bois exegesis, political philosophy, and anti-racist politics.

§1: Two-ness ≠ Double-Consciousness

We need an analysis of two-ness because it is not identical to double-consciousness. The key evidence for the distinction between these two concepts is the famous third paragraph of the first chapter of *Souls*, which reads in full:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. 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 two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two

warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois [1903a] 1997, 38)

It's no surprise that so many readers have treated two-ness and double-consciousness as identical: the terms appear in directly adjacent sentences, and Du Bois uses both terms to describe the experience of Black Americans in "this American world," where racial equality hasn't obtained. But on a careful reading, the text reveals that the concepts are in fact distinct. Du Bois characterizes double-consciousness as a sensation of seeing or evaluating oneself from the perspective of others who view one as inferior. By contrast, two-ness refers to feeling the normative pull of two distinct sets of strivings and ideals. And whereas double-consciousness paradigmatically involves a conflict between a person's self-conception and others' conceptions of that person, two-ness paradigmatically involves a conflict between the person's strivings or ideals.³

Furthermore, a person can experience two-ness without experiencing double-consciousness. Consider the case of a White person who emigrates from Germany to western Virginia and, eventually, becomes a naturalized citizen of the United States. As a White person, they don't experience persistent and unjust contempt. (E.g., they are unlikely to be eyed with suspicion while shopping or while jogging in a predominantly White residential area.) Accordingly, they don't experience double-consciousness. Now, suppose that they experience the normative pull of American ideals (e.g., freedom) and German ideals (e.g., social order), where these ideals are conceptually at odds with each other.⁴ For example, insofar as they identify as an American, they might value the breadth of the freedom of speech in the United States, but insofar as they identify as

³ Some commentators, e.g., Gooding-Williams (2009) and Kirkland (2013), argue that two-ness is not necessarily conflictual. For the purposes of my discussion, I will focus on the conflictual form of two-ness.

⁴ These are not Du Bois's examples of American or German ideals.

German, they might feel that people shouldn't be free to advocate "illegal action at some indefinite future time"⁵ against members of a racial or cultural minority.⁶ This person experiences two-ness but not double-consciousness. So, two-ness is distinct from double-consciousness, and experiencing double-consciousness isn't necessary to experience two-ness.⁷

Recognizing the distinction between two-ness and double-consciousness is the first step toward gaining insight into how many people experience racism and what they might do to counter White supremacy. The next step is to spell out in greater detail what two-ness is.

§2: Two-ness As a Dilemma of Self-Disrespect

I will now argue that, according to Du Bois, two-ness consists in a dilemma of self-disrespect. The first horn of the dilemma is that non-White Americans cannot endorse certain American ideals without disrespecting themselves as members of a non-White race. The second horn of the dilemma is that non-White Americans cannot reject these problematic American ideals *tout court* without disrespecting themselves as Americans. Thus, whether or not they endorse the problematic American ideals, they fail to respect themselves.

In §2.1, I will identify the kinds of ideals that are involved in two-ness, on Du Bois's account. In §2.2, I will spell out the first horn of the dilemma of self-disrespect by

⁵ *Hess v. Indiana*, 414 U.S. 105 (1973). Currently, incitement to lawless action in the indefinite future is protected under the First Amendment. See also *Brandenburg v. Ohio*, 395 U.S. 444 (1969).

⁶ *R.A.V. v. City of St. Paul*, 505 U.S. 377 (1992).

⁷ I take it that the account of the relation between two-ness and double-consciousness I have sketched is consistent with Du Bois's discussion in the tenth chapter of *Souls* about "painful self-consciousness," "double life," and "double ideals" ([1903a] 1997, 155–56). Fully spelling out the relation between double-consciousness and two-ness is beyond the scope of this paper.

explaining how Du Bois thinks certain American ideals conflict with other ideals. In §2.3, I will spell out the second horn of the dilemma by explaining why he thinks many non-White Americans nevertheless feel the normative pull of problematic American ideals. And in §2.4, I will connect the dilemma of self-disrespect to his notion of self-realization. Although my discussion will follow Du Bois in focusing on Black Americans, I take it that my reconstruction of his account of two-ness generalizes to other non-White Americans.

§2.1: What Ideals Does Two-ness Involve?

According to Du Bois, two-ness paradigmatically involves a conflict between two distinct sets of strivings and ideals.⁸ The kinds of strivings and ideals to which he's referring play a central role in his early political philosophy and philosophy of race. In his ([1897a] 1997) essay "The Conservation of Races" (hereafter "Conservation"), Du Bois explains the connections between strivings, ideals, and racial identity in his definition of a race as a cultural group:

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*. (230; emphasis added)

For Du Bois, a racial identity is constituted (in part) by specific ways of life and thought, that is, by the distinctive ideals toward which the members of a given race strive collectively. Maintaining, avowing, or embracing one's racial identity involves endorsing

⁸ In the third paragraph of *Souls*, it is not clear whether Du Bois is referring to sets of strivings and ideals or to individual strivings and ideals. Some of Du Bois's remarks in various works suggest that each race has a particular striving (singular), i.e., a striving toward a unique ideal (singular). However, other remarks attribute multiple strivings and ideals to each race. Using *sets* allows for the possibility that Du Bois is referring to individual strivings and ideals.

the ideals and strivings of one's race. Abandoning or disavowing that identity involves renouncing these ideals and strivings.

So, when Du Bois writes that many Black Americans experience two-ness as feeling like “an American, a Negro” with “two souls,” “two unreconciled strivings,” and “two warring ideals,” he's claiming that the strivings and ideals that constitute one's identity as a Black person are in conflict with those that constitute one's identity as an American.⁹ This raises the question of how he thinks these strivings and ideals conflict. Ernest Allen, Jr., (2002) argues that Du Bois doesn't answer this question and, thus, fails to show that two-ness explains anything about Black Americans' experience of racism. For example, Du Bois doesn't explain how what he calls the Black “strife for another and a juster world” (Du Bois [1903a] 1997, 85) is supposed to conflict with any of “the greater ideals of the American Republic” (43).¹⁰

Allen attempts to identify a specific Black ideal and a specific American ideal and explain how Du Bois thinks these two particular ideals conflict. I will take a different approach that doesn't depend on analyzing the content of Du Bois's conception of specific Black ideals. I will argue that Du Bois thinks that the conflict consists in Black Americans' inability to simultaneously endorse Black ideals and certain American ideals without disrespecting themselves. This is because the American ideals in question

⁹ A reader might be puzzled that Du Bois thinks Americans are members of a distinct (i.e., American) race, but much of what he says about race also applies to what we might understand as nations. In particular, racial and national selves or identities are similar in that they consist in certain strivings and ideals. For the purposes of our discussion, then, we can understand Du Bois's remarks as referring to an American nation instead of an American race. For further discussion, see Appiah (1985), Jeffers (2013, 415–17, 425–26), Moses (1978, 135), and Outlaw (1996).

¹⁰ Many of Du Bois's other examples of Black strivings or ideals don't obviously conflict with “the greater ideals of the American Republic.” These examples include “love of harmony and beauty” (Du Bois [1903a] 1997, 39); “work, culture, liberty” (43); “human brotherhood” (43); “Truth, Beauty, and Goodness” (84); “Freedom” (85); and the “Gospel of Sacrifice” (86).

threaten the autonomy of Black people and disvalue Black ideals, whatever the content of the latter.¹¹

My analysis will focus on the American ideal of commercial freedom (i.e., the freedom to gain and exchange material wealth). Du Bois thinks that commercial freedom is an American ideal,¹² and he's clearly ambivalent toward it: although he argues that commercial freedom is necessary for people to thrive (Du Bois [1903a] 1997, 84), he indicates in several places that commercial freedom conflicts with Black ideals and strivings. For instance, in "Conservation," he asserts that Black Americans' "subtle sense of song has given America . . . its only touch of pathos and humor amid its mad money-getting plutocracy" ([1897a] 1997, 234). His negative appraisal of American "mad money-getting plutocracy" reflects his belief that American strivings and institutions are plagued by a vicious valuation of material wealth.

Similarly, near the end of the opening chapter of *Souls*, Du Bois criticizes Americans' pursuit of wealth by linking it to brutality (and brutishness), which he contrasts with Black Americans' faith, reverence, humility, humor, and "soul" (Du Bois [1903a] 1997, 43). On my reading, Du Bois thinks that these various characteristics are expressions of Black ideals, which suggests that he views the American pursuit of wealth as conflicting in some way with Black strivings and ideals. And given that the pursuit of

¹¹ I will follow Allen in focusing on ideals rather than strivings. I take it that much of the following discussion would apply to strivings as well: even if the ideal toward which one strives is morally benign, one's striving might consist of actions that are morally problematic for reasons similar to the ones I describe below.

¹² In "Conservation," Du Bois asserts that "the English nation stood for constitutional liberty and commercial freedom" (Du Bois [1897a] 1997, 232). He also claims that Americans inherited their race ideals from the English (Du Bois [1894?] 2015; [1897a] 1997, 231, 233; [1903a] 1997, 39). Hence, we can infer that he thinks constitutional liberty and commercial freedom are American ideals.

wealth is a striving associated with the ideal of commercial freedom, it's plausible that he thinks the ideal of commercial freedom also conflicts with Black ideals.

Why does Du Bois think the American pursuit of wealth and the ideal of commercial freedom generate two-ness? The answer to this question is outlined in the passages I cited in the previous two paragraphs: the American pursuit of wealth involves a vicious valuation of material wealth. For Du Bois, the viciousness of the pursuit of material wealth and the ideal of commercial freedom consists in their tendency to subordinate other strivings and ideals (Du Bois [1903a] 1997, 63, 83–85). When people subordinate these other ideals to material prosperity, these ideals are less able to serve as normative constraints on how people act.

For example, suppose that I value justice. This means that recognizing that a certain course of action would inhibit (or promote) justice thus gives me a reason to avoid (or pursue) that course of action. So, justice serves as a normative constraint on how I act. Now, suppose that I value material prosperity more than I do justice. In my deliberations, I will be more responsive to considerations of material prosperity than to considerations of justice. Thus, justice is a weaker normative constraint than it would be if I were to value it at least as much as I value material wealth. Du Bois's worry is that Americans value material wealth in such a way that they aren't adequately responsive to considerations of justice or other ideals. He worries that, when faced with a choice between promoting commercial freedom and promoting some other value, Americans will always choose to promote commercial freedom. The idealization of material wealth effectively removes constraints on the pursuit of wealth; in practice, the American ideal of commercial freedom is the ideal of *limitless* commercial freedom.

Du Bois argues that this limitlessness has motivated and justified domination and exploitation because prioritizing commercial freedom and material wealth gives a person reason to treat other people as mere means by which to accumulate wealth. In a similar vein, Du Bois thinks that idealizing material wealth also makes one less able to sympathize with others and more likely to treat them poorly. For instance, he writes, “For the laborers as such, there is in these new captains of industry neither love nor hate, neither sympathy nor romance; it is a cold question of dollars and dividends. Under such a system all labor is bound to suffer” (Du Bois [1903a] 1997, 136–37).¹³ Moreover, Du Bois links the limitless pursuit of commercial freedom to the slave trade, a point I will return to shortly (Du Bois [1903a] 1997, 90–93).

To summarize, Du Bois thinks that the idealization of material wealth transforms the American ideal of commercial freedom into the ideal of limitless commercial freedom, which motivates or justifies treating people as mere means by which to accumulate wealth. He also thinks that embracing one’s American identity involves endorsing this ideal.

§2.2: The First Horn

The first horn of the dilemma of self-disrespect arises from recognizing that, e.g., the American ideal of limitless commercial freedom conflicts with other ideals such that one cannot endorse the American ideal without disrespecting oneself.

¹³ Other remarks that connect the pursuit of wealth, lack of sympathy, and domination or exploitation appear at (Du Bois [1894?] 2015, 42; [1899] 1996, 126–30; [1903a] 1997, 43, 144–45; 1905, 1198).

At first glance, explaining the conflict between the American ideal of limitless commercial freedom and other ideals, as well as the link between this conflict and self-disrespect, seems straightforward. First, from the foregoing discussion on Du Bois's critique of the ideal of limitless commercial freedom, we can conclude that anyone who endorses the ideal endorses the treatment of people (including oneself) as mere means by which to accumulate material wealth. By endorsing the ideal, one fails to respect oneself as a person with moral rights against domination and exploitation (Boxill 1976; Hill 1973).

Moreover, one fails to respect oneself as an agent by subordinating one's own ideals to the pursuit of commercial freedom or depriving oneself of the means to realize these other ideals. Endorsing the treatment of people as mere means by which to accumulate material wealth entails subordinating all other strivings and ideals, including one's own, to the pursuit of commercial freedom and material wealth. And whatever these other ideals are, striving for them requires meeting certain basic needs (e.g., bodily integrity), which in turn requires being free from domination and exploitation. Given that the ideal of limitless commercial freedom motivates and justifies domination and exploitation, one cannot endorse this ideal without possibly depriving oneself of the means necessary to realize other ideals. Since properly valuing an ideal usually entails securing the means to realize it, anyone who endorses the ideal of limitless commercial freedom thereby devalues the other ideals they are committed to valuing.

So, in addition to failing to respect themselves as people with moral rights against domination and exploitation, Black Americans who endorse the American ideal of limitless commercial freedom also devalue the ideals that they are committed to valuing

insofar as they identify as members of the Black race—at least, according to Du Bois’s definition of race. Their failure to honor their commitment to valuing these strivings and ideals is a failure to respect themselves as valuers, that is, as autonomous agents who make rational judgments about what and how to value (MacKenzie 2022).

Here, an objection naturally arises: surely, there’s nothing about the content of the ideal of limitless commercial freedom that distinguishes between various racial groups. So, doesn’t this imply that *everyone* experiences (or should experience) two-ness? Doesn’t the American ideal of commercial freedom threaten German Americans’ self-respect, Italian Americans’ self-respect, Irish Americans’ self-respect, and so forth? My reconstruction of Du Bois’s account must be wrong, goes the objection, given that many Black Americans experience two-ness but many White Americans (including those of German, Irish, or Italian descent) typically do not (Horowitz et al. 2019).

My reply is that Du Bois thinks that, as a matter of historical fact, the ideal of limitless commercial freedom was and continues to be used to motivate and justify the domination and exploitation of Black people in particular. He observes that Americans have collectively treated Black people as mere means and have often justified this treatment by appealing to anti-Black prejudices and to the value of commercial freedom. He recognizes that the limitless pursuit of commercial freedom is implicated in the slave trade, the institution of human chattel slavery, the system of sharecropping that kept Black farmers in debt, and the discrimination and exploitation faced by Black laborers (Du Bois [1899] 1996; [1903a] 1997, 90–91, 93–94, 103–16, 117–32, 136–46).

By contrast, White people in America have enjoyed at least some protection against domination and exploitation even as the category of White people expanded to

include groups previously held in contempt (e.g., German, Irish, and Italian people) ([1899] 1996, 97–146). Du Bois's point, then, is that the American ideal of limitless commercial freedom is race-neutral in principle but not in practice because it has subordinated Black people far more systematically than White people. The connection between endorsing this ideal and devaluing Black ideals is thus much tighter than the connection between endorsing the ideal and devaluing White ideals.

So, here is the first horn of the dilemma of self-disrespect constitutive of two-ness: Black Americans cannot endorse the American ideal of limitless commercial freedom without devaluing the Black ideals they are committed to valuing. This explains, at least in part, why Du Bois thinks that this American ideal conflicts with Black ideals in general. And given that one disrespects oneself as a Black person by endorsing the American ideal of limitless commercial freedom, we also have an explanation for why many Black Americans find it so difficult to embrace their American identity.

§2.3: The Second Horn

The second horn of the dilemma is that Black Americans, insofar as they identify as American, cannot reject any American ideal *tout court* without disrespecting themselves. The explanation seems straightforward. Rejecting an American ideal means disrespecting or devaluing that ideal. So, if someone is committed to endorsing American ideals, rejecting an American ideal constitutes a failure to uphold that commitment. And failing to uphold that commitment is to disrespect oneself as a valuer.

But why do Black Americans have any reason to endorse the American ideal of limitless commercial freedom in the first place, given that the ideal is especially morally

problematic for Black people? Why does Du Bois think they feel the normative pull of this and other problematic American ideals?

Part of his answer is that Black Americans are members of the American nation who, for generations, have contributed to the nation and its institutions. He writes that “actively we have woven ourselves with the very warp and woof of this nation. . . . Would America have been America without her Negro people?” (Du Bois [1903a] 1997, 193). Given that Black Americans have been responsible for the development of the American nation, he thinks that they also have an interest in continuing to shape it and are thus committed to valuing American ideals.

This resonates with the answers that many present-day Black Americans give when asked why they value America and American ideals. They describe valuing these ideals as a way of honoring their ancestors who “built this country,” especially those who fought on America’s behalf or who “continue to serve [in the military] even though we are not always seen as equals” (Summers 2020; see also Johnson 2018). The idea is that respecting others, including one’s ancestors, involves respecting them as agents who make or have made value judgments. The fact that one’s ancestors structured their lives around striving for American ideals (even if they were coerced into doing so) provides a defeasible reason to structure one’s own life in the same way. To renounce or condemn American ideals without a sufficient countervailing reason would be a failure to respect one’s ancestors as valuers, a failure to respect their sacrifice. Put differently, one has a defeasible reason to value the product of their sacrifice even if one doesn’t value the context in which they made that sacrifice.

Insofar as they identify as American, then, Black Americans feel the normative pull of American ideals—including the ideal of limitless commercial freedom. According to Du Bois, they cannot avow their American identity and reject these ideals *tout court* at the same time. Failing to endorse and strive for these ideals would constitute a failure to uphold their commitment as Americans to valuing these ideals. Black Americans who are so committed cannot abandon or renounce, e.g., the American ideal of limitless commercial freedom without failing to respect themselves as valuers.

So, Black Americans' two-ness consists in a dilemma of self-disrespect. Whether they endorse or renounce the American ideal of limitless commercial freedom, they disrespect themselves either as Black people or as Americans.

§2.4: Self-Respect and Self-Realization

One could press Du Bois by noting that although those who identify as American might have a defeasible obligation to properly value American ideals, they also have an obligation to properly value only those things that are worth valuing. Why don't the ethical flaws of certain American ideals like the ideal of limitless commercial freedom provide sufficient reason to renounce them?

Du Bois's answer is that Black Americans must endorse both Black and American ideals to achieve self-realization. Immediately after introducing two-ness in the first chapter of *Souls*, he links two-ness and self-realization:

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-consciousness 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 simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American.
([1903a] 1997, 39)

By “strife,” I take Du Bois to be referring to the conflict between strivings and ideals constitutive of Black Americans’ two-ness.¹⁴ Accordingly, we can read Du Bois as characterizing this conflict as an obstacle to “self-conscious manhood” and the merging of one’s American and Black selves.¹⁵ He calls this merging “self-realization” elsewhere in *Souls*, referring to the realization of the collective racial self ([1903a] 1997, 41, 65, 85). In short, he’s arguing that Black Americans’ self-realization requires that they resolve the conflict that gives rise to two-ness so that they can simultaneously endorse American and Black ideals without disrespecting themselves.¹⁶

According to Du Bois, self-realization (i.e., the realization of a collective racial self) consists in both self-assertion and self-development (Du Bois [1897a] 1997, 232–33; [1903a] 1997, 66).¹⁷ Self-assertion involves recognizing and demanding that others recognize the value of the ideals and strivings (i.e., the ways of life and thought) of one’s race.¹⁸ In other words, self-assertion is one way of properly valuing one’s race ideals and strivings. Self-development consists in a race developing its ideals and strivings and achieving the conditions required to realize them. On Du Bois’s view, self-development is partially constitutive of self-realization because it’s necessary for self-assertion.

¹⁴ Gooding-Williams (2009, 83) and Hawkins and Davis (2024, 74–75) similarly link “strife” to the conflict Du Bois describes in the previous paragraph.

¹⁵ For a critical analysis of Du Bois’s notion of self-conscious manhood and its relation to self-realization, see Rodman (2021).

¹⁶ It might puzzle a reader that, in *Souls* at least, Du Bois conceives of self-realization as the realization of a collective self rather than an individual or personal self. See Rodman (2021) for a reading of Du Bois that views self-realization as an individual endeavor. However, we frequently use “self” to refer to a collective self when we discuss, e.g., national self-determination, and Du Bois connects races and nations in “Conservation.” Furthermore, his reference to “the American Negro” as a sociohistorical subject in the passage above indicates that he is thinking of Black Americans as a group (Hawkins and Davis 2024, 74–75).

¹⁷ For further discussion, see Gooding-Williams (2009).

¹⁸ This is how I read Du Bois’s claim that self-realization involves delivering a race’s “full spiritual message [to the world]” so as to “help guide the world nearer and nearer that perfection of human life for which we all long” ([1897a] 1997, 232). See also his remarks on how races can influence each other at ([1897a] 1997, 232, 233, 234, 237; [1903a] 1997, 39, 43, 101, 189, 192, 193).

The first horn of the dilemma of self-disrespect (i.e., endorsing problematic American ideals) precludes Black Americans from engaging in self-assertion. If Black Americans were to endorse problematic American ideals, they would devalue Black ideals and strivings.¹⁹ Accordingly, they wouldn't be justified in demanding that others recognize these ideals and strivings as valuable. Furthermore, by disrespecting themselves as valuers, they also undermine their standing to make demands on others to take their value judgments seriously.²⁰

The second horn of the dilemma (i.e., rejecting problematic American ideals) precludes Black Americans from engaging in self-development. When he writes that “America has too much to teach the world” ([1903a] 1997, 39), he's claiming that American ideals (even problematic ones) are necessary for Black Americans' self-development. He thinks that it's by endorsing and pursuing American ways of life and thought that Black Americans can gain the material wellbeing, social organization, and cultural resources that they need in order to develop and achieve Black ideals.²¹ This is another reason he offers for why many Black Americans feel the normative pull of American ideals like limitless commercial freedom. Now, suppose Black Americans were to abandon an American ideal *tout court*. This would constitute a failure to uphold a

¹⁹ See, e.g., Du Bois's critique of Booker T. Washington's political program at (Du Bois [1903a] 1997, 67–68). Washington argues that Black Americans should temporarily set aside demands for political power and civil rights in order to concentrate on economic development. Du Bois accuses Washington of promoting the abandonment of Black ideals as well as certain American ones. Du Bois thinks that even temporarily abandoning these ideals would irreparably undermine Black Americans' self-respect, ultimately precluding them from achieving self-realization.

²⁰ Du Bois also makes this point at, e.g., ([1897a] 1997, 238; [1899] 1996, 393–97; [1903a] 1997, 71, 156–57). His point echoes Kant's rather blunt remark that “one who makes himself a worm cannot complain afterwards if people step on him” ([1797] 1996, Ak. 6:437).

²¹ For other passages in which Du Bois links (self-)development and Euro-American ideals, see his remarks at ([1897b] 2015; [1899] 1996, 388–90, 392–93; [1900?] 1968, 67; [1903a] 1997, 39, 42–43, 65, 67, 68, 71–72, 84–85, 86, 87, 88–89, 91, 92, 94–95, 99, 101, 135–136, 138, 142, 146–47, 157, 189; [1903b] 2015; [1904] 1997, 249–50, 252, 253–54).

commitment to an ideal necessary for their self-development and, thus, a failure to uphold a commitment to their self-development. Since self-development is necessary for self-assertion, Black Americans who fail to uphold their commitment to self-development would also fail to uphold their commitment to self-assertion. Self-assertion is constitutive of properly valuing Black ideals and strivings, so Black Americans' failure to uphold their commitment to self-assertion would also constitute a failure to properly value Black ideals and strivings. And all of these failures are ways in which Black Americans would disrespect themselves as valuers.

In short, Du Bois argues that Black Americans' self-realization requires that they respect themselves by endorsing Black ideals (for purposes of self-assertion) as well as American ones (for purposes of self-development and, thus, self-assertion).²² So, he thinks they shouldn't renounce either set of ideals. However, since they cannot endorse both sets of ideals without disrespecting themselves, self-realization remains out of reach.²³

Plausibly, Du Bois's account of two-ness generalizes in two ways. First, the account can accommodate the two-ness of other non-White Americans. American chattel slavery was a unique institution, but it was situated in a broader context of domination and exploitation of non-White people.²⁴ Second, at least some American ideals other than the ideal of commercial freedom may be such that one disrespects oneself by endorsing

²² This reasoning is implicit when Du Bois writes that "in this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost." It's more explicit in the text that immediately follows this remark. See Du Bois ([1903a] 1997, 39).

²³ Two-ness is similar to oppressive double binds: whatever an agent does, they become a mechanism in their own oppression (Hirji 2021).

²⁴ This is a theme that Du Bois carries into later works. See, e.g., Du Bois (1917; [1920] 2007).

them.²⁵ I take it that Glenn Smith senses that police brutality against Black and other non-White Americans expresses not the ideal of limitless commercial freedom but perhaps the ideal of law and order.²⁶

§3: Du Bois's Solution to Two-ness

I've argued that Du Bois characterizes non-White Americans' experience of two-ness as consisting in a dilemma of self-disrespect: whether or not non-White Americans avow problematic American ideals, they fail to respect themselves in some way. Furthermore, Du Bois thinks that without this self-respect, they cannot achieve self-realization. However, throughout his early writings, Du Bois holds that they *can* achieve self-realization, implying that he thinks that it's possible to resolve the conflict that gives rise to their two-ness.

The question is, how are they to resolve the conflict? In the case of Black Americans, Du Bois's critique of accommodationist strains of African American politics, which subordinate the pursuit of political and social equality (at least temporarily) in favor of improving economic security, suggests that abandoning Black ideals and endorsing American ideals like commercial freedom in their current form is off the table (Du Bois [1903a] 1997, 62–72, 156–57). But Du Bois also critiques certain forms of Black American resistance, namely, those that involve total separation from White

²⁵ One might object that it is possible to identify as American without endorsing problematic American ideals. There are two replies available based on Du Bois's remarks. First, it is possible that one consciously disavows but involuntarily strives for problematic ideals. Recall that, according to Du Bois's definition of a race in "Conservation," members of a race strive voluntarily or involuntarily toward that race's ideals. Second, it is possible that one is actually striving for morally benign forms of these ideals. I discuss this possibility in §3.

²⁶ On the relation between this ideal and racism, see Brown (2019), Hassett-Walker (2020), and Sarat (2020).

America (i.e., Black separatism), separation from poorer or less educated Black Americans, or rejecting social/political/economic engagement with White people in favor of pursuing sensual pleasure (68, 156–58). So, rejecting American ideals *tout court* isn't a viable option either. But to say that one must either endorse American ideals in their current form or reject them *tout court* is to ignore a third option. As Du Bois recognizes, one can remain committed to American ideals in some form, just not their current form. He thinks that Black Americans can strive for American ideals by revising them.

To illustrate how Du Bois's solution of "striving by revising" works, I will argue for two interpretive claims. The first claim is that Du Bois thinks Black Americans can resolve their two-ness by using Black ideals to reshape American ideals. The second claim is that he thinks Black Americans must hone or fine-tune Black ideals so that the reshaping process produces American ideals that are consistent with (Black Americans') self-respect.

In the first chapter of *Souls*, Du Bois writes that Black Americans "simply [wish] *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" (39; emphasis added). Notice that Du Bois doesn't write that one "wishes that someone would make it possible" or "wishes that it became possible." Rather, he thinks Black Americans wish to exercise agency to resolve their two-ness, rather than having to rely solely on the intervention of other people or chance.

However, the question of whether this wish can be fulfilled remains open through the final chapter of *Souls*. There, Du Bois explicitly raises the question:

Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs [African American spirituals] there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things. . . . The meaning is

always clear: that sometime, somewhere, men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins. Is such a hope justified? Do the Sorrow Songs sing true? (192)

The “ultimate justice of things” involves people giving everyone the respect they are due, rather than respecting or disrespecting them on the basis of race. The theme of respect links the hope Du Bois identifies in the Sorrow Songs to the wish he discusses in the first chapter of *Souls*. The “ultimate justice of things” consists in Black Americans resolving their own two-ness. In asking, “Is such a hope justified?” Du Bois is asking whether Black American can resolve their two-ness.

Du Bois thinks that the history of Black American music justifies such hope and provides a model for self-realization. Du Bois describes “the development of the slave song” from African music to Afro-American music to a music that’s “still distinctively Negro . . . but the elements are both Negro and Caucasian” (189). Du Bois’s use of the word “development” and his description of the result as “both Negro and Caucasian” suggests that he sees the history of Black American music as an instance of self-development, albeit in a single domain. Black Americans took up American aesthetic or musical ideals and created a new kind of music. For Du Bois, the history of Black American music serves as a model and a metaphor for self-development and a demonstration that self-development is possible.

Du Bois then extends the metaphor. He argues that “one might go further and find a fourth step in this development, where the songs of white America have been distinctively influenced by the slave songs or have incorporated whole phrases of Negro melody” (189). Given that the history of Black American music is a model or metaphor for Black American self-development, the influence of Black Americans on (White) American music is a model or a metaphor for successful self-assertion, i.e., for how

Black Americans can influence (White) American ideals. Through their singing, Black Americans used—and continue to use—Black musical and aesthetic ideals to influence (White) American musical and aesthetic ideals. Du Bois suggests that Black Americans can use Black ideals to influence American ideals more broadly. Specifically, he thinks that Black Americans can resolve their two-ness by using Black ideals to reshape American ideals into ideals that are consistent with Black Americans’ self-respect.

This brings me to my second interpretive claim: Du Bois thinks Black Americans must hone or fine-tune Black ideals to reshape American ideals in the appropriate ways. How the American ideals change will depend on the specific actions of Black Americans, and these actions reflect the content of Black ideals—Black Americans’ message to the world, to use the language of “Conservation” (Du Bois [1897a] 1997, 232–33).

Du Bois provides a sketch of his account of the fine-tuning process. He argues that Black American leaders are the “ideal-makers” of their communities, the ones who set the ideals for which Black Americans will strive (Du Bois [1903b] 2015, 218; [1904] 1997, 256–57). Moreover, he thinks that Black ideals are open to interpretation:

The Negro group leader not only sets present standards, but he *supplies in a measure the lack of past standards*. . . . The leader of the masses must *discriminate between the good and bad in the past* . . . ; he must, in fine, stand to this group in the light of the *interpreter* of the civilization of the twentieth century to the minds and hearts of people who, from sheer necessity, can but dimly comprehend it. ([1904] 1997, 257; emphasis added)

This means that determining the exact content of Black ideals will depend on how these leaders interpret Black Americans’ past in relation to their present. However, Du Bois recognizes that leaders’ interpretations may not converge automatically ([1903a] 1997, 62–72). Instead, he suggests that determining the content of Black ideals is a process in

which leaders contest and negotiate their interpretations of Blackness and of American or European civilization.

When Du Bois asserts that African American spirituals “are the articulate message of the slave to the world” but that “such a message is naturally veiled and half articulate,” he’s alerting Black Americans that their spirituals are rich in conceptual and normative resources in need of interpretation and clarification (Du Bois [1903a] 1997, 189). And in explicitly raising the question of whether Black Americans can resolve their two-ness, he’s issuing a call to action, urging them to interpret, contest, and negotiate the content of Black ideals and American ideals.

Du Bois thinks resolving two-ness requires sufficiently good interpretations. Sufficiently good interpretations of American ideals would accurately and precisely pick out both the good- and the bad-making features of these ideals. That is, the best interpretations of American ideals would specify what should be preserved and what should be changed for people to endorse these ideals without disrespecting themselves. Sufficiently good interpretations of Black ideals would clarify the conceptual and normative resources Black Americans could bring to bear on problematic American ideals, and different interpretations might reveal different resources. The best interpretations of Black ideals would furnish the conceptual and normative resources that would allow Black Americans to reshape American ideals into ideals they could endorse without disrespecting themselves.

Du Bois gestures at what the process of reshaping the American ideal of commercial freedom would involve when he argues that America would be better “if she [were to] replace her brutal dyspeptic blundering with light-hearted but determined Negro

humility” ([1903a] 1997, 43). The limitlessness of the American ideal of commercial freedom entails that the moral worth of persons (or the proper regard owed to them because of their worth) doesn’t constrain the pursuit of commercial freedom. In contrast, virtuous humility, as expressed in Black Americans’ spirituals, consists in recognizing that the value of people’s moral worth trumps the value of commercial freedom or material wealth.²⁷ Virtuous humility thus attunes Black Americans to the limitlessness of the American ideal of commercial freedom and empowers them to imagine and pursue an ideal of commercial freedom that is properly limited by considerations of people’s moral worth.

To summarize, Du Bois thinks Black Americans can resolve their two-ness by using Black ideals to reshape American ideals, and he thinks Black Americans must hone or fine-tune Black ideals so that the reshaping process produces American ideals they can endorse without disrespecting themselves. In this way, Du Bois thinks Black Americans can continue to strive for American ideals by revising them into ethically better forms. His solution to two-ness plausibly generalizes to other non-White Americans.

This indicates that Du Bois’s integrationist politics isn’t merely a matter of assimilating to or embracing antecedently given racial or political identities. For people who have experienced domination and exploitation to successfully integrate into the political community which dominated and exploited them, he thinks they must transform the polity. More specifically, they must change the ideals and strivings that gave rise to their domination and exploitation. Changing the polity doesn’t require completely remaking it from scratch, though. Rather, the process will involve revising the ideals that

²⁷ For further discussion of the relation between humility, respect, and self-respect, see Dillon (2015).

currently organize their political lives such that they can endorse these ideals without disrespecting themselves. They thereby strive for these ideals by revising them.

§4: Feelings of Contradiction and Anti-Racist Politics

We can now explain in greater detail why the distinction between double-consciousness and two-ness is important. Du Bois uses each concept to describe a different aspect of how one experiences racism. We can appreciate this if we think with Glenn Smith about his feelings of contradiction. Applying the concept of double-consciousness makes salient the link between his feelings of contradiction and the apparent anti-Black conduct of many law enforcement officers. Smith conceives of himself as a proud member of his local and national communities. However, he realizes that many law enforcement officers, as indicated by their violent conduct, conceive of Black people not as members of these communities but as threats to be neutralized. And he realizes that there's a contradiction between his self-conception and the conception that others (i.e., law enforcement officers) have of Black people like him. These realizations are constitutive of double-consciousness.

Applying the concept of two-ness illuminates a different aspect of Smith's experience that helps us see why he says that his feelings of contradiction are "*in* [his] feelings of pride" as a Black American (emphasis added). His pride in being an American is a claim to and celebration of the equal worth that he and others have in virtue of striving for American ideals. In this sense, his pride is a form of self-respect.²⁸

Renouncing these ideals would be to disrespect himself as an American, but he realizes

²⁸ To be more precise, Smith's pride is a form of interpersonal recognition self-respect. For a discussion of this form of self-respect, see Dillon (2015).

that endorsing and striving for these ideals in their current form would be to disrespect himself as a Black person. It seems that no matter how he tries to respect himself, he disrespects himself. This contradiction (of respecting and disrespecting himself) is different from the contradiction that's involved in his experience of double-consciousness.

Moreover, the “striving by revising” solution to two-ness differs from the solution to double-consciousness, further emphasizing the gap between the two concepts. Consider Robert Gooding-Williams’s (2009) insightful reading of Du Bois, which focuses on double-consciousness rather than two-ness. On Gooding-Williams’s reading, Du Bois thinks that anti-Black racism produces false beliefs about Black Americans and that these false beliefs yield a distorted picture of Black life. When White Americans judge Black Americans according to American ideals, they apply these ideals to the distorted, false picture. Consequently, Black Americans who internalize the judgments of their White counterparts experience double-consciousness. Du Bois’s remedy is to correct false beliefs through, e.g., proper education of both Black and White Americans (Gooding-Williams 2009, 80–88).²⁹

On my reading, addressing either double-consciousness or two-ness alone isn’t enough. Even if all Americans had true beliefs about Black ideals and strivings, it could still be the case that American ideals conflict with Black ideals in the way I described in §2. Similarly, even if one could endorse both American and Black ideals without disrespecting oneself, the prevalence of false beliefs could still lead to one experiencing disrespect from others, which may lead to double-consciousness. As I read him, Du Bois

²⁹ Frank Kirkland (2013) arrives at a similar conclusion in his analysis of double-consciousness.

introduces double-consciousness and two-ness as distinct concepts because he recognizes that racism has epistemic and metaphysical dimensions. That is, anti-Black racism involves both false beliefs about Black identity and problematic ideals that disrespect Black Americans; and whereas double-consciousness arises from the false beliefs, two-ness arises from the problematic ideals.

A further advantage of my interpretation is that it vindicates Du Bois's political thought with respect to the political thought of many non-White Americans today. They recognize, as Du Bois does, that combating racism involves not only correcting false beliefs but also revising American ideals (Bull 2020; Demsas and Ramirez 2021; Johnson 2018; Medina 2020; Sanchez and Foxworth 2022; Summers 2020). Interpretations of Du Bois that focus on double-consciousness alone may not be able to capture this parallel between Du Bois's political thought and contemporary emancipatory political activity.

Conclusion

I've argued that Du Bois holds that double-consciousness and two-ness are distinct and that once we recognize this, we can gain important insights by focusing on two-ness. Focusing on two-ness illuminates a major source of the difficulty non-White Americans face in trying to embrace both their racial and American identities. They experience the normative pull of both race ideals and national ideals, but they cannot strive for both without disrespecting themselves. I've also argued that Du Bois thinks that non-White Americans can fine-tune their racial identities to reshape their American identity, a thought that many contemporary non-White Americans share.

My discussion has two upshots. First, there is a heretofore underappreciated connection between Du Bois and certain contemporary racial constructivists with conservationist commitments. His definition of a race as a group of people striving for certain ideals puts him squarely in the constructivist camp, and he's a conservationist in virtue of his view that Black Americans have an obligation "to maintain their race identity" at least until they achieve self-realization (Du Bois [1897a] 1997, 237). But like Linda Martín Alcoff (2006), Yen Le Espiritu (1992), and Chike Jeffers (2013), Du Bois also holds that members of oppressed racial groups in America can actively define and redefine their collective identities through political action in response to White supremacy. His solution to two-ness involves members of a race interpreting, contesting, and negotiating the ideals toward which they strive. Through this political process, non-White Americans fine-tune their ideals to reshape American ideals so that these American ideals no longer support White supremacy.

The second upshot is that my claim that Du Bois thinks we can reshape our own racial and national identities invites us to think differently about his political thought and its relevance to contemporary politics. According to Gooding-Williams's (2009) examination of Du Bois's early thought, Du Bois advances a version of political expressivism, according to which the aim of African American politics is to express a collective racial identity that antecedently unites all Black Americans. However, according to my reading, the identity involved is not fully determined at the outset. Rather, Du Bois envisions (elite) members of a race contesting, negotiating, and reinterpreting their race's collective ideals and strivings. This is not merely a process of discovering a pre-fixed identity. Furthermore, given that Du Bois thinks American ideals

and strivings are open to revision, it seems possible that Black ideals and strivings might also be open to revision. This means that Black Americans might produce and express one set of ideals and strivings initially, but these ideals and strivings need not remain the same over time.³⁰ At the very least, my reading suggests that even if Du Bois thinks that identities are to some extent antecedently given, he doesn't necessarily think that they are therefore totally unchanging.

The idea that people can contest, reinterpret, and transform their identities is a crucial commitment of the radical Black feminism that developed in the latter half of the twentieth century.³¹ It might be somewhat surprising that Du Bois's early political thought and radical Black feminism share a commitment to the view that identity is dynamic. However, Du Bois was confronting some of the same challenges that Black feminists have. They recognized that building solidarity that is strong and sustainable enough to destroy the roots of oppression requires taking into account people's different experiences and different interests—and, perhaps, different identities. Their solution involves contesting, reinterpreting, and transforming identities in order to continuously generate a basis for solidarity.

This sort of collective political activity is instrumentally valuable because it enables people to act jointly with others, thereby making it easier to accomplish their goals in the face of adversity. But this political activity is also non-instrumentally valuable. One way White supremacy reinforces itself and limits people's agency is by maintaining hierarchies based on identities that are defined according to those

³⁰ This seems to bring Du Bois's political thought (at least, my interpretation of it) somewhat closer to the "no-foundations" theory of politics that Gooding-William (2009) favors.

³¹ See, e.g., *The Combahee River Collective Statement* ([1977] 2015), hooks ([1984] 2015), Garza (2020), and Lorde ([1984] 2007).

hierarchies. For non-White Americans, working together to define themselves beyond the constraints imposed by White supremacy is a way of respecting themselves as agents who make and are capable of making judgments about what and how to value. In this way, contesting, reinterpreting, and transforming identities is constitutive of self-respect.

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