AMERICAN EXPERIMENTALISM
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The nineteenth was the first century of human sympathy,—the age when half wonderingly we began to descry in others that transfigured spark of divinity which we call Myself; when clodhoppers and peasants, and tramps and thieves, and millionaires and—sometimes—Negroes, became throbbing souls whose warm pulsing life touched us so nearly that we half gasped with surprise, crying, “Thou too! Hast Thou seen Sorrow and the dull waters of Hopelessness? Hast Thou known Life?” And then all helplessly we peered into those Other-worlds, and wailed, “O World of Worlds, how shall man make you one?”

W.E.B. Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk

It is not widely appreciated that William James put the experimentalist understanding of thinking called pragmatism to work in connection with the idea of race. He did, though, and he was not alone. James thought about human races not in mechanical scientific terms, or as inevitable causal products of their physical geographical environment, but in terms of choice and creation. In his picture, we human beings invented, and continue to invent and develop, our races or peoples in pursuit of a better future. In what follows, I try to explain this philosophical picture of race and compare it with that of James’s student W.E.B. Du Bois. James’s and Du Bois’s two pictures may seem very different; James’s view is so naturalistic that we can think of his “races” as biological phenomena like species, while Du Bois made a point of describing race as a kind of social construction that is apart from biology. Still, I think it is useful to see these figures as sharing a picture of human races as willed and hopeful social experiments. Moreover, I think that there is still something to be said today for this picture.

I
James described his pragmatism as “the empiricist temper regnant” (James 1978: 31). Not because it featured an epistemology with sensory data as its positive foundations, and not because its metaphysics identified feelings and perceptions as the atomic particles of the universe; instead, pragmatism was empiricist in “temper” because it explained how we human believers pick, retain, and discard beliefs using our manifold experiences of life. The good or “true” beliefs and principles were the ones that provided us with satisfactory experiences, while the bad or false ones did the opposite. This
understanding of truth turned experiences into a “corridor” among our ideas, including not only our scientific, moral, and philosophical theories but even our religious outlooks. It was how we entered those ways of thinking and how we left them when the time was right. It was above all an experimentalist story of thought, speech, and belief; we were to create hypotheses, principles, and faiths, then try them on for size. In the end, even pragmatism itself was to get this treatment. (See Cormier 2000, especially chapter 1, for a comparison of James’s pragmatism with traditional empiricism.)

This practical approach to thinking and belief was, and is still, inspired by science, especially the Darwinian variety. Darwin and Wallace had seen that in natural selection, nature designs successful forms of life by experimenting, creating organisms randomly and then winnowing out the losers unsuited to their diverse environments. Pragmatic philosophers observe a similar process at work as human thinkers more or less randomly create ideas and then winnow out the bad ones. Nature performs its experiments blindly while we human thinkers sometimes work self-consciously, especially in the hypothesize-test-hypothesize process known as science; but despite that large difference, these natural and human processes are alike enough to illuminate each other. Both involve using materials of uncertain reliability to cope, better and better over time, with an uncertain world.

Still, despite being inspired by Darwinian science in two ways, pragmatism is not a “scientism.” It does not claim that scientifically skeptical, self-conscious hypothesizing followed by sensory observations is the only rational way to think. William James is of course famous for his idea, compatible with his pragmatism, that we should sometimes exercise the “will to believe,” our capacity to adopt certain beliefs not because scientific evidence supports them but because we want to have beliefs (James 1979: 18–20 esp.). Sometimes moral and religious beliefs, especially, get neither support nor disproof from scientific observations, and we rightly adopt them because they satisfy us and we expect them to make our lives of experience still more satisfactory in the future. We thus use our experiences of life as a way into—and, who knows, maybe we will someday use them as a way out of—our particular religious and moral beliefs. Moreover, James holds that “[F]aith in a fact can help create the fact.” A belief like “I can get to know God” resembles a belief like “I can make this person like me” in that if people believe either thing preemptively, that belief can sometimes help make itself true (James 1979: 28–29). These are beliefs in the possibility of successful action, and succeeding at actions sometimes requires some Little-Engine-That-Could, I-think-I-can faith, not the kind of skeptical thinking we usually associate with science.

This story of experimental thinking, believing, and faith-having is centered around individual thinkers, persons who have unique experiences and are forced to invent novel ideas to help them make sense of things. Many of these new ideas will turn out in the end not to help much, but the ones that do work out for a while—and for more people than the individual thinkers alone—will be identified as “truths” for as long as they keep working out. Indeed all truths are ideas or beliefs that depend for their origin and continued existence on this human struggle to make do; there is no truth out there in the world just sitting and waiting to be found. Thus James notoriously claims that human beings make the truth. But this is not the absurd and self-refuting claim that we individual thinkers make our own realities as we produce thoughts that satisfy us and us alone. Instead this means that truth, the stuff that fills our libraries, our conversations, and the head of anybody with common sense, is no more than the aggregate of all our
useful beliefs, those singular products of struggle. Truth ends up a social phenomenon, but it depends for its origin on individual thinkers and their unique experiences. By making these contributions, individual human beings play a role in their societies like the one individual organisms play in their biological races and species.

II

One of James's best-known remarks, found emblazoned over the elevators in the lobby of William James Hall on the Harvard campus, is “The community stagnates without the impulse of the individual. The impulse dies away without the support of the community.” This is a passage from the lecture “Great Men and their Environment” (James 1979: 163–189). There James argues that human communities, which he alternately describes as “nations” and “races,” depend for their development on particular individuals much as plant and animal species do.

This offers Darwinian opposition to the views of Herbert Spencer and his followers. Though Spencer was actually both a follower of and an influence on Darwin—his description of evolution by natural selection as “survival of the fittest” was adopted by Darwin and featured in later editions of *The Origin of Species*—James argued that Spencer’s evolutionary view was not Darwinian enough. It underestimated the importance of individual organisms and overestimated the importance of physical environments in the development of biological species, and it went on to overestimate the importance of both physical and social environments in the development of human races. In Darwin’s and Wallace’s own theories, particular individual plants, animals, and human beings in specific, one-off circumstances were indispensable to the development of all the races and species that actually did develop over natural history. The forms of life we find here on earth might have been entirely different, even in the same environments and with the same physical laws, had certain individual organisms not happened to come along and make their distinctive genetic and behavioral contributions. And James thinks that human “races,” peoples, or populations are like plant and animal species in this regard. They have been decisively shaped by the impulses of specific individuals, even if those individuals could never have done their shaping without some social cooperation.

Spencer, by contrast, offered the view that became “social Darwinism.” Individuals are not real causal forces in that story, and the idea that individual human beings are free to change the big natural world-system is a lot of superstition. As Spencer says in his *Study of Sociology*, great human leaders and creators are not “deputy gods,” and so

the origin of the great man is natural; and immediately this is recognized, he must be classed with all other phenomena in the society that gave him birth as a product of his antecedents. . . . [T]he genesis of the great man depends on the long series of complex influences which has produced the race in which he appears, and the social state into which that race has slowly grown. . . . Before he can remake his society, his society must remake him. . . . If there is to be anything like a real explanation of [the social changes he makes], it must be sought in that aggregate of conditions out of which both he and they have arisen.

(Spencer 1961: 30–31; cited at James 1979: 233)
And we cannot really intentionally improve the social circumstances that nature has created for us:

With mankind as with lower kinds, the ill-nurtured offspring of the inferior fail in the struggle for existence with the well-nurtured offspring of the superior; and in a generation or two die out, to the benefit of the species. A harsh discipline this, most will say. True; but nature has much discipline which is harsh, and which must, in the long run, be submitted to. The necessities which she imposes on us are not to be evaded, even by the joint efforts of university graduates and workingmen delegates; and the endeavor to escape her harsh discipline results in a discipline still harsher. Measures which prevent the dwindling away of inferior individuals and families, must, in the course of generations, cause the nation at large to dwindle away.

(Spencer 1978: 204)

This is a rugged individualism that denies the individual any power to do anything, or at least anything that will improve the social world.

Spencer’s followers were sometimes—and sometimes still are today—even more explicitly deterministic and more clearly concerned with what we would recognize today as human races. Grant Allen argued that

If the people who went to Hamburg had gone to Timbuctoo, they would now be indistinguishable from the semi-barbarian negroes who inhabit that central African metropolis; and if the people who went to Timbuctoo had gone to Hamburg, they would now have been white-skinned merchants driving a roaring trade in imitation sherry and indigestible port. . . . The differentiating agency must be sought in the great permanent geographical features of land and sea; . . . these have necessarily and inevitably moulded the characters and histories of every nation upon the earth.

(Allen 1878: 121, 123; cited at James 1979: 235–236)

But in criticism of Spencer and Allen, James cited Alfred Russell Wallace’s book Malay Archipelago:

Borneo and New Guinea, as alike physically as two distinct countries can be, are zoologically wide as the poles asunder; while Australia, with its dry winds, its open plains, its stony deserts, and its temperate climate, yet produces birds and quadrupeds which are closely related to those inhabiting the hot, damp, luxuriant forests which everywhere clothe the plains and mountains of New Guinea.

(Wallace 1883: 13; cited at James 1979: 240)

Geography is not destiny for either the animals or for us. The peculiarities of mutating animals can, if they are adaptive, propagate and change an entire population of animals over generations into another “race” or even another species, and those initial peculiarities are not determined by the “great permanent geographical features of land and sea.” They are instead tiny random insertions into those large physical environments. They
are not completely independent of physical causation—maybe nothing is, and thus maybe nothing is random in that sense—but no general law determines their appearance. The same peculiarities can appear and spread in very different environments and fail to appear or spread in all similar environments. Moreover, individual human beings make analogous random insertions of peculiar motivations and ideas into their physical and social environments, and those “impulses” can spread and change human communities as dramatically as mutations anthropogenic change species. They can even go on to change the large physical environment. Think “climate change.”

James notes that

the social surroundings of the past and present hour exclude the possibility of accepting certain contributions from individuals; but they do not positively define what contributions shall be accepted, for in themselves they are powerless to fix what the nature of the individual offerings shall be.

(James 1979: 231)

Hence individual persons are a force in social development in much the same way individual organisms are in species development. It goes without saying that particular persons are not gods and do not create their and their societies’ futures by solitary fiat, but they can, do, and should make a difference in how their societies turn out. And, of course, just as individual organisms and their contingent “offerings” have often been a force in successful adaptations to the physical environment, likewise individual persons’ contingent contributions have played a role in the development of the most successful human populations. Thus “university graduates and workingmen delegates” may well have something positive to contribute to the development of society as they try to make life better for the worst-off citizens. No guarantees, of course; we will have to look to the future and see. But at least Darwin’s theory of evolution does not argue the contrary in advance.

Again, there are present-day Spencerians who have not got this message. There are still evolutionary psychologists who argue that human beings have, thanks to their original physical environment, inevitably developed certain behavioral tendencies that are incompatible with certain forms of social life. E.O. Wilson is credited with a terse summing-up and endorsement of one such argument concerning Marxism, for competitive human beings if not for altruistic bees and ants: “Wonderful theory. Wrong species” (McKie 2006). Such scientific thinkers answer the question “Nature or nurture?” with “Nature,” or at least with “Both.” Moreover, some contemporary social Darwinists are committed, like Spencer himself, to the idea that different human populations have been shaped by different original natural environments and thus have different tendencies and abilities. They argue that nature has produced not only really distinct human races but hierarchies among them, making some races naturally more intelligent and suited to civilization than others and setting limits to what can be done with some racial groups whatever attempts at socialization might be made. Nurture cannot trump nature, after all. (These researchers, including figures like J. Philippe Rushton, call themselves “racial realists”; Ian Hacking and Philip Kitcher call them “ogre naturalists.” See Rushton 1995, Hacking 2005, and Kitcher 2012.)

However, a Jamesian answer to the nature-nurture question is, basically, “Neither.” Neither physical geography, socialization, nor their combination has determined what
our human populations are now or are becoming. Existence precedes essence, in a way, both for human beings and for populations of them. Persons are still parts of the natural world, of course, and the process by which they create themselves and their groups is a natural process much like the one by which plant and animal species create themselves. (Sometimes the human process is equally unselfconscious and non-forward-looking.) But both of these processes are, as Charles S. Peirce might have said, tychistic (see Peirce 2009: 135–157). Chance is operating in them, providing needed raw material—genetic material in the case of the animals and plants, intellectual material in the human case.

The individuals who provide that raw material are turning-places in natural history, human history, and the histories of their different races. For the Spencerian who discounts them and their contributions, the world is basically a big, rational, four-dimensional block whose events are entirely predictable because nothing ever really happens there. But James says that by appealing in this way to the Eternal and Unchanging Rational Whole in his explanation of how people and peoples got to be the way they are, Spencer in effect answers every question: “God is great.” Genuine and successful scientific thinking looks at least sometimes to the particular and the proximate in explanation of events. In James’s example, if we want to account for the death of a sparrow after we see a little kid throw a rock, asking what must have happened after the Big Bang or in the history of the Celts is a waste of mental energy. We might as well check the zodiac; in the block universe, a really full horoscope would answer all questions about sparrow deaths, too. But even if the world is in fact a block, this is obviously not how science works. Instead in a case like this we will look to the particular and contingent case of rock-throwing that we actually observed, and we will thus not only halt the development of an adolescent psychopath but also display what James calls “an efficient as distinguished from an inefficient intellect,” or scientific rather than superstitious thinking (James 1979: 163–164, 176).

Thus, James will say, social Darwinism is not really the scientific outlook it pretends to be. We can have a biological understanding of races even as we take them to be shaped and steered by the individuals inside them, so long as we understand biological science to describe a world of change and contingent developments that depend on discrete individual actors and events—which is the way Darwin himself understood it.

III

W.E.B. Du Bois also fought Spencer’s kind of scientism and mechanism regarding race in his own way. In his well-known historical and sociological studies of African American communities and in his literary essays and fiction examining black life and culture, the black race was not a biological taxon that could be discerned by means of inherited physical characteristics. Instead it was “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.” While these “ideals” are “subtle forces” that have generally followed the natural cleavage of common blood, descent and physical peculiarities, they have at other times swept across and ignored these. At all times, however, they have divided human beings into races, which, while
Thus although different human races have contingently been associated with differing physical and physiological traits, they are essentially historical and social phenomena that cannot be accounted for by science—or at least not by the natural sciences, the sciences that someone like Spencer would have taken as the model of human knowledge.

Du Bois developed his distinctive picture of race under the influence of both American and German teachers. He studied philosophy under James and Josiah Royce at Harvard University, went on to earn an M.A. at Harvard in history, and then went overseas for postgraduate study in economics in Berlin. He returned to the United States to complete his dissertation and become the first black scholar to earn a Harvard Ph.D., and he then began his historical and sociological research, aiming ultimately to help solve “the problem of the color-line,” or to use scientific understanding of his own “race” to guide policy makers and fight bigotry and oppression.

Du Bois had studied in Berlin with such figures as the sociologist and political philosopher Max Weber, the historian Heinrich von Treitschke, the economist Gustav von Schmoller, and the psychologist, historian, sociologist, and philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey. As Kwame Anthony Appiah tells the story (Appiah 2014), these figures had a formative influence on Du Bois and his approach to social science. Dilthey, who distinguished the fact-finding of the Naturwissenschaften or natural sciences from the imaginative and sympathetic law-seeking of the Geisteswissenschaften or social sciences, held that “Nature we explain [erklären], but psychic life we understand [verstehen]” (Dilthey 1990: 144; Dilthey 2010: 119; cited at Appiah 2014: 78). To provide this understanding, the social scientist has to show the world as it looks through the eyes of the subject of study. Du Bois tried to do this not only in his literary work but also in his socio-historical research.

Schmoller was known as a member of the “younger historical school” of economists, who preferred societies to isolated individuals as the methodological starting point for their research. They argued that economics could only be genuinely scientific by using statistics and empirical generalizations based on observations of specific social and historical circumstances. They challenged classical economic theory, and, when they in turn were challenged by neo-classicists of the “Austrian school,” they fought...
in a famous Methodenstreit or method-conflict that anticipated debates persisting in economics today. They argued that human social phenomena should be studied differently from the phenomena of natural science, especially since in the end social science should result in policy prescriptions and even assessments of justice; but they still held that those social phenomena should be studied by means of careful empirical observation. Social scientists should not be positivists, but they should “leave the sollen [or what should be] for a later stage and study the geschehen [the facts, what actually happened] as other sciences have done.” (Du Bois recorded this aphorism of Schmoller’s in his notebook; cited at Broderick 1958: 369 and Appiah 2014: 31.)

In his meticulous studies of such phenomena as black life in the Reconstruction-era South and the 1917 East St. Louis race riot, Du Bois displayed both respect for the facts and Schmoller’s kind of effort to understand sympathetically. An example from Black Reconstruction:

“Fifty Dollar reward.—Ran away from the subscriber, his Negro man Pauladore, commonly called Paul. I understand Gen. R. Y. Hayne has purchased his wife and children from H. L. Pinckney, Esq., and has them on his plantation at Goosecreek, where, no doubt, the fellow is frequently lurking. T. Davis.” One can see Pauladore “lurking” about his wife and children.

The system of slavery demanded a special police force and such a force was made possible and unusually effective by the presence of the poor whites. This explains the difference between the slave revolts in the West Indies, and the lack of effective revolt in the Southern United States. In the West Indies, the power over the slave was held by the whites and carried out by them and such Negroes as they could trust. In the South, on the other hand, the great planters formed proportionately quite as small a class but they had singularly enough at their command some five million poor whites; that is, there were actually more white people to police the slaves than there were slaves. Considering the economic rivalry of the black and white worker in the North, it would have seemed natural that the poor white would have refused to police the slaves. But two considerations led him in the opposite direction. First of all, it gave him work and some authority as overseer, slave driver, and member of the patrol system. But above and beyond this, it fed his vanity because it associated him with the masters. Slavery bred in the poor white a dislike of Negro toil of all sorts. He never regarded himself as a laborer, or as part of any labor movement. If he had any ambition at all it was to become a planter and to own “niggers.” To these Negroes he transferred all the dislike and hatred which he had for the whole slave system. The result was that the system was held stable and intact by the poor white.

(Du Bois 1998: 12)

This historical work conveys facts, but it also deploys irony, drama, and keenly observed accounts of how things seemed to the actors on the scene. Black Reconstruction goes on to live up to its somewhat florid subtitle, An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880.

But though Du Bois’s approach to history and sociology reflects the influence of his German mentors, he found early in his career that even the softer, geistige law-seeking
the Germans prescribed would not provide the understanding of black life in America that he sought. He asked himself, as he tried to make sense of racial conflict,

[F]or what Law was I searching? In accord with what unchangeable scientific law of action was the world of interracial discord about me working? I fell back upon my Royce and James and deserted Schmoller and Weber. I saw the action of physical law in the actions of men; but I saw more than that: I saw rhythms and tendencies; coincidences and probabilities; and I saw that, which for want of any other word, I must in accord with the strict tenets of Science, call Chance. I went forward to build a sociology, which I conceived of as the attempt to measure the element of Chance in human conduct. This was the Jamesian pragmatism, applied not simply to ethics, but to all human action, beyond what seemed to me, increasingly, the distinct limits of physical law.

(2007: 38)

Thus he adopted James’s pragmatism and gave up what he understood to be the Germans’ search for “Law” in social science. He did not give up trying to be scientific; instead, he adopted a different, more Darwinian account of scientific understanding. He would thus go on to account for black history and life in a new way. He would lay out lots of empirically observed facts, but he would still acknowledge the utter contingencies of human life in society. He would take pains to illustrate something that preceding historical and sociological works had missed or suppressed—namely, the ways black Americans used their particular experiences and shaped, or strived to shape, their lives and communities with their ensuing contingent choices.

Du Bois appreciated what many present-day interpreters of James’s pragmatism have not—namely, the whole point of it. James’s theory of truth and meaning is above all a way of showing how and why we individual thinkers introduce chance effects into our world. Like nature, we strive to produce novelties that survive, endure, and shape the world so that it contains more fitness. (We strive, as Du Bois says, both voluntarily and involuntarily, though nature always lacks real volitions.) Unless we appreciate the way human thinkers introduce their new, contingent ideas in the hope of finding satisfactory guides to action, we will not really understand what people, and peoples, have done or can do in the world. But we can appreciate this human characteristic, and even in a scientific way, if we take the Darwinian natural-history approach found in James’s version of pragmatism. Du Bois went on to do just this in his different kinds of writing.

However, Du Bois did not acknowledge the extent to which this approach to the development of human races was continuous with any kind of biological one. Some of his best-known comments disparage the whole idea of biological race, and he explicitly rejected the mechanistic biology that saw life-processes as inevitable and socio-historical investigation as unnecessary. Did Du Bois perhaps see this kind of mechanism in the law-seeking scientific work of his German teachers? Is this what he was dissenting from when he “fell back upon . . . Royce and James and deserted Schmoller and Weber”?

While Schmoller seems to have persisted in a kind of colonialist social Darwinism, always holding that natural racial characteristics were significantly responsible for the behavior and social plight of the “lowest races” such as blacks (see Zimmerman 2010: 109–110), he still saw cultural, geistige phenomena at work in human life generally, and he would have abhorred Spencer’s totally mechanistic thinking. And Max Weber and
Dilthey were founders of modern hermeneuticist thought about interpretation. (The essays in Weber 1949 are widely taken to develop the idea of the hermeneutic circle for modern social science; see Dilthey and Jameson 1972 for Dilthey’s appropriation of classical and Biblical hermeneutics.) Through their different uses of the concept Verstehen or understanding, they marked off human activity as an area of investigation separate from the study of physical necessity. They were thus as opposed as Schmoller to dehumanizing Spencer-like views. What advantage was there, then, in following James instead of Weber? There was one feature of James’s approach to scientific thinking that was important to Du Bois and that the German outlook lacked: that was room to draw non-physical, non-physiological racial distinctions and discern distinct “spirits,” “messages,” and “ideals” among the different races.

Weber had started out in his early work as a social Darwinist, attributing many of the political and social difficulties of Africans to both the nature and the culture of the Negro. But over time he left his scientific racism behind, and indeed, by the time of his Economy and Society, he held that “The whole conception of ethnic groups is so complex and so vague that it might be good to abandon it altogether” (Weber 1978: 385). He did not in fact abandon that concept, and he instead went on to define it explicitly, but his definition was in terms of subjective belief in an imagined origin. An ethnicity was only an identity; it did not constitute “a group with concrete social action” like a kinship group (Weber 1978: 389). Dilthey explicitly depreciated sub- and trans-national groups like families, tribes, and races as factors in the development of nations or peoples, which were the real subjects of historical processes. Thanks to economic, political, and cultural forces, members of the same race might be physically similar while differing profoundly in Geist. “[W]hile [genealogically] related peoples show a kinship of somatic types which maintains itself with marvelous constancy, their historical and spiritual physiognomy creates ever more refined differences in all the various spheres of the life of a people” (Dilthey 1991: 92). And, again, Schmoller held on to a scientific racism even as he added cultural factors to his story of human development.

Thus the tendency of the Germans was against the idea of non-physical, socially constructed race as sociologically significant. But Du Bois was determined to describe what the people known as “Negroes” had contributed, and still had to contribute as a family-like group, to the larger human story. He held that “For the development of Negro genius, of Negro literature and art, of Negro spirit, only Negroes bound and welded together, Negroes inspired by one vast ideal, can work out in its fullness the great message we have for humanity” (Du Bois 1970: 79).

The black race was, and should be, bound together by a history of which hereditary physical and physiological similarities were merely a “badge.” That badge symbolized the “social heritage of slavery; the discrimination and insult” (Du Bois 2007: 59). The English “race” over its history had come to stand for “constitutional liberty and commercial freedom,” the Germans for “science and philosophy,” the Romance race for “literature and art,” and by holding on to and charting their own long-neglected history, the black race would enable itself to make a similar contribution, one involving a unique sensitivity to widely unappreciated injustice. That message would be, in the end, of value to all the races, all the motifs in the human symphony.

Du Bois allowed that the “Negro” categorization, like all similar racial ones, was “inaccurate” (1928: 96–97; cited at Appiah 2014: 158); perhaps no such “black race” existed in extra-conceptual reality, and maybe there was not even a coherent concept of
such a group—yet. Du Bois was struggling to create that concept by means of his intellectual life. But somehow, despite this, it seemed clear that all humanity had something important to learn from the black experience of captivity and striving for justice; and the way the world looked through the eyes of “black” people could be lost if that label was.

If we could hold on to that label, we still would not be able to explain blackness, but we could hope to understand it. We might not be able to account for it even in terms of the psychological laws or universal cultural structures the Germans sometimes aspired to find, but we would begin to see ourselves in the people who found themselves together on a unique journey from slavery to second-class citizenship. (Of course even black people can fail to see this story as their own, so some of them may need to develop this understanding.) And, after developing this sympathy, we will be in a better position to make policy and value judgments concerning the people who have made this journey and who are still on the road.

IV

This last issue is the most important for Du Bois, who wants to learn, for himself and his fellow leaders in the Talented Tenth, how the experiences and choices of blacks have figured in their past survival and might figure in their future. This explains what Kwame Anthony Appiah identifies as Du Bois’s internal Methodenstreit, his whiplash between individualism and collectivism. Du Bois is as clear as he can be in rejecting the idea, attributable to “the individualistic philosophy of the Declaration of Independence and the laisser-faire philosophy of Adam Smith,” that individuals are at the bottom of historical events; he says that “the Pharaohs, Caesars, Toussaints and Napoleons of history . . . were but epitomized expressions” of their “vast races” (Du Bois 1996: 40). But he nevertheless believes that, thanks to “Chance,” no race has a future that is preordained or guaranteed by sociologically discernible laws; thus unless certain talented, educated individuals in the black race choose to take their special leadership role, black ideals are in jeopardy. Moreover, the job of those would-be-great individual leaders will not be that of spreading ideals that all black people, or even the majority, share. Instead, Du Bois’s Negro Academy

seeks to comprise something of the best thought, the most unselfish striving and the highest ideals. There are scattered in forgotten nooks and corners throughout the land, Negroes of some considerable training, of high minds, and high motives, who are unknown to their fellows, who exert far too little influence. These the Negro Academy should strive to bring into touch with each other and to give them a common mouthpiece.

(Du Bois 1996: 45)

That is, it should help the leaders develop and promulgate their ideas and ideals, at first among other blacks and then among the other races. Maybe those ideals would not have been forged and adopted even by the leaders except in circumstances unique to Africans or their descendants, and maybe they will resonate with other black persons’ emotional lives especially or uniquely once word gets out; even so, many of the most important black ideas and ideals have originated, and will originate in the future, in the thoughts of “scattered,” neglected individuals.
Of course the Toussaints and Tutankhamens of the world could not have become what they were or done what they did had they either been born to or stayed in total isolation. Neither could the Napoleons, Catherine the Greats, Newtons, or Leonards. They were special persons, but they could have had all their personal uniqueness and no socio-historical greatness whatever had the societies around them not given them education and assistance—and even resistance, which stopped them from taking the wrong path or toughened them up on the right one. But a community will have needed the contributions of earlier individuals to have those concepts ready to share, and in the future the community will need more new “impulses” of individuals, as James would have put it, to improve or even merely to remain stable in changing circumstances. Thus the relationship between individuals and society is a reciprocal relationship of mutual support, and even mutual creation and re-creation over time. Neither the individual nor society is at the bottom or foundation here; there is no foundational position in this ongoing process.

Individuals in this pragmatic story do not play the role of atomic constituents of society. They are not Schmoller’s bugbears, the individual rational actors of classical or neoclassical economics. (Richter 2015: 148–149 distinguishes Schmoller’s more sociological understanding of economic actors from that of the “neoinstitutionalists.”) Individuals make and remake their societies not by being cog-parts in a machine-whole but by engaging in a conversation with that society. They soak up its ideas and share its experiences, they have their own peculiar experiences and distinctive emotional and intellectual reactions, and then they generate and offer new ideas from their eccentric perspectives. Those ideas either meet sympathetic ears and spread through the society or meet scorn and die away. And Du Bois’s Talented Tenth is the scattered group of individuals poised to enter this push-and-pull relationship with their society and then perhaps to be acclaimed as great persons of history.

Still, even if great individuals have needed social relationships, did they need relationships to their “races,” or their sub- or trans-national ethnic groups? That sounds doubtful if we question whether any such groups are really to be found out there in the world beyond our concepts, and even more so if we question whether there is a clear concept of race to begin with. However, Du Bois’s argument for the usefulness of race talk is striking because it is just that—an argument that race labels are useful, strategic, pragmatically necessary. Du Bois says not that those labels carve preexisting human nature at its joints but rather that “the race idea, the race spirit, the race ideal” is the “vastest and most ingenious invention of human progress,” or a tool for making lives better in the future.

Whose lives? At first, the label “black” will better the lives of the people who have to ride Jim Crow in Georgia. By accepting this label and resisting motivations to “lose our race identity in the commingled blood of the nation,” people now categorized as black will enable themselves to contribute to the “development of Negro genius, of Negro literature and art, of Negro spirit.” After that they will live in a better black culture with better leaders. If talented black people refuse to band together under that label, they may go on to be great Mississippians, Americans, or human beings, but there will be no great intellectual or political leaders moving the “black race” forward. Some people will, as a matter of fact, still have to live under that label whether they accept it or not, and they will not progress politically or socially, or at least not as efficiently as they would if they strived together as a “vast family.” And in the end that will be too bad...
not only for black people but also for everyone else. “[T]hat black to-morrow which is yet destined to soften the whiteness of the Teutonic to-day” will not come to pass. If the black “banner” is someday hung on the “broad ramparts of civilizations” “and hallowed by the travail of 200,000,000 black hearts beating in one glad song of jubilee” (Du Bois 1996: 42), then the black wisdom of centuries will be spread among all human beings, providing lessons we can all learn as we create and re-create all the races—including, perhaps, finally, the human race. But if that banner is never hung, that uniquely black wisdom may be lost. Certainly it will not be preserved and spread as determinedly as it would be by people who saw that wisdom and that banner as their own.

That is Du Bois’s story, anyway, or at least it was in the early and middle periods of his thinking. His later years, as he grew closer to and finally joined the Communist Party, involved different thoughts about race and its relations to economic class. But it is this earlier story, in which the black American “would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism” (1996: 102), that still resonates strongly today. When the much-lauded journalist and commentator Ta-Nehesi Coates says that the American goal now is not to become post-racial but rather post-racist (Coates 2015b), and when Coates insists on the idea that race is a social construction based on historical and present-day sociopolitical realities (Coates 2013), he is seizing racial ideas and using them in something like Du Bois’s pragmatic way. Coates’s goal has ultimately been the annihilation of racial distinctions rather than the proud hoisting of the black banner, but Du Bois also looked past the culmination of the black cultural story to a social result that benefits all of humanity. (Interestingly, Coates in his latest work has evidently come to regard racial distinctions and white supremacy as indefeasible natural realities. He says of the police who killed a young black friend: “The earthquake cannot be subpoenaed. The typhoon will not bend under indictment.” See Coates 2015a: 83; and see Rogers 2015 for a critique in response.)

Du Bois’s kind of socio-historical attempt to understand race has faced some ingenious criticism from Kwame Anthony Appiah. He once argued that we cannot define a race in terms of its history any more than we could do the same with a person. We would have to know who a person was before we could identify any bit of history as part of her history; analogously, we would have to know which people counted as “white” or “black” before we could identify any historical events as part of white or black history and then use those events in categorizing the white or black race. Of course we would then fall back on biology and physiology in figuring out who is who, and so all attempts to use a historical concept of race for purposes of group solidarity and development will involve reinstituting the scientifically discredited biological conception of race. (Appiah 1985: 26–29). In the end, looking for “black people,” even with the best political intentions, is like looking for “witches”—another scientifically discredited concept (Appiah 1989: 40).

But as an undergraduate student once asked me, does this mean we can never identify a group of people using a historical criterion? Do we need an independent criterion to identify groups like “the people who were onboard in the bus crash and their heirs”? So much for class-action lawsuits, if so. And surely something like chattel slavery in the Americas might work just as well to pick out a group of human beings and their
kin, ancestors, and descendants. Moreover, we obviously might need to pick out such a
group if we want to understand, for example, why some people who share a lot of kin-
ship relations did so much worse materially and politically than others in the post–Civil
War South. That kind of investigation is nothing like a witch hunt.

Du Bois does pick out such a group, and he describes this group as wearing, by and
large, a “badge” of color that has brought insults and injuries over history. But is he
really falling back on laws of biological inheritance, here? He does not make this clear,
but he might merely be augmenting his historical criterion with a typical visible feature,
rather than an essential one, of that historically defined group. Such a feature, created
in many but not all group members by hereditary physiology, might be a matter of racial
tendency rather than essence or definition. (Appiah considers racial characteristics as
a matter of tendencies in his discussion of Matthew Arnold at 1998: 55.) Spotting a black
person by color might be like spotting an American man by his inability to speak a
foreign language and his inclination to tour European cathedrals wearing shorts. Those
criteria would be imperfect but reliable and connected with socio-historical causes and
consequences.

Of course not all “blacks” have had a visible “badge.” Du Bois certainly knew that
some have had no trouble “passing” for white. And there have even been the odd cases
in which some people, because of the cultural roles they played, have, either intention-
ally or by accident, wound up candidates for the designation “black” though they had
no (recent) African ancestors at all. (Wayne Joseph and doubtless others came before
Rachel Dolezal. See Kaplan 2003 and Holloway 2015 for stories of these two crossers
of racial boundaries.) Hence the boundaries of the socio-historical category “black,”
very imperfectly indicated by the hereditary badge of color, will be fuzzy and contest.
Still, the vexedness of this category is not exactly news, and an account of it that is not
itself somewhat vexed should cause even more suspicion than the category.

In any case, Appiah has, over the years, reconsidered the idea that a socio-historical
understanding of race requires reinstituting a biological account. He has allowed
more recently that it is possible to think of race-labels as categories something like
“Irish-American,” “Yankees fan” and “member of my bowling league,” which band peo-
ple together benignly by shared social interests alone. The problem, he notes, is that
while race-labels can have this kind of “recreational” use, they also have a bad ten-
dency to “go imperial” and demand recognition whether they are doing us good or not
(Appiah 1998: 101–104). We should therefore be ready to throw them overboard when
they become more trouble than they are worth.

Since race is the issue, however, and we are therefore talking about questions of
human dignity and political and economic justice over centuries, “recreational” will
not really be the best term for these labels and their use. If Du Bois is right, black folks’
“glad song of jubilee” will commemorate matters of life and death, unlike “Here Come
the Yankees.” Fortunately there is a better term waiting, a better way of describing the
use to which we can put the concept of blackness even though it picks out nothing
pre-classified by nature. Thinking in James’s terms, we can think of race-talk not merely
as “recreational” but as “practical” or “pragmatic.”

Perhaps this was what Du Bois was doing when he embraced “the Jamesian pragmat-
ism” and set out to leave his German teachers behind. He had come to believe that
racial concepts were valuable because they were tools we human beings could use with
the goal, conscious or unconscious, of changing the world and bettering our lives. But
how could a categorizing term make life better without reflecting pre-existing realities? Maybe, indeed, in something like the way “Yankees fan” does it: by creating and then increasing local human solidarity, then contributing to a more complex solidarity with fans of the other teams. Thus Appiah is right to see a parallel here; “recreational” value is in the end one kind of “pragmatic” value. But there are other kinds, and thus there are still more helpful analogies to draw.

“American,” is, I think, one such analogous label, even if “Irish-American” is not. “American,” like “black,” has often been a matter of life and death, so it seems inapt to think of it as a merely recreational identity. But it should still not be allowed to “go imperial,” since it marks no real, intrinsic, essential quality in its wearers and since other identifying qualities can be just as important, or even more important, to their possessors. Some people are stuck with that label at birth as a matter of whom they are born to, but they can renounce it. (Other people will still use it to categorize them whether they like it or not, though, just as people will still find themselves being labeled “black” whether they like it or not.) Alternatively people can choose to embrace that label and wear it with other “Americans” in a large, scattered locality. Bound together under that label they may devise and achieve a unique set of American ideals, even if some Americans belong to subgroups and transnational groups that have their own distinct ideals to work on at the same time. After all, subgroups working in harmony for the greater good is what the big experiment known as the United States of America is all about. *E pluribus unum*, and all that; this is a country designed around the project of sharing multiple identities. And if Americans who do not share all their identities in common someday find a way to work together and also to live peacefully among other nations, contributing as a group to worldwide happiness—don’t laugh, it could happen—then that label will also have been of value to humanity at large.

When Du Bois compared blacks to the German and English “races,” perhaps he was showing that he would have drawn an analogy like this one. If so, we might describe him as a kind of black nationalist as well as a social constructionist. Without advocating the development of a black homeland with borders, an army, and a bicameral legislature, he did want to encourage black people to think of themselves as a distinct nation in a looser sense, maybe the same sense James had in mind when he used the terms “race,” “community,” and “nation” more or less interchangeably. If so, then we might reasonably say that James and Du Bois shared a pragmatic picture of “races” as phenomena that make a kind of Darwinian scientific sense.

However, considering the damage to humanity that the idea of race has done over the centuries, we may wonder whether scientific credibility is enough of an excuse to keep lugging this super-explosive device around in our conceptual toolkit. Racial thinking can not only go imperial, it can go nuclear. Why, then, risk making things still worse than they are? Du Bois will respond that his kind of scientific-yet-sympathetic racial sociology can be useful in a large project not only of recreation but of re-creation, of taking a despised group and remodeling it into even more of a political, social, and cultural force than it has been so far. It will do this partly by making that group aware of its own power and partly by helping members of other groups understand the people they despise.

Of course we do not get to know with certainty and in advance whether this kind of thinking will, on balance, pay off. Certainly we have seen plenty of deadly conflicts among the “families,” “peoples,” and “nations” to which Du Bois compares
races, and a conflict among nations once literally went nuclear. Nevertheless, we are disinclined to get rid of nation-talk or family-talk, since many if not all of the greatest and most beneficial accomplishments in human history have been made by individuals operating, and cooperating, in groups like these. A pragmatist about race may therefore recommend that we run some risk and try a hopeful experiment, keeping the black community, family, people, nation, or race together long enough so that, thanks in part to the remarkable individual leaders it contains, it can make its contribution to the human conversation, or rather carry on contributing. Especially under new conditions of sympathetic understanding, despite the evil that has been done in the name of race, and despite the evident fact that races are made as much as found, this experiment—like the American experiment—remains a reasonable thing to try.

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