

## W.E.B. DuBois and Socratic Questioning<sup>1</sup>

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*Taking its cue from W.E.B. DuBois's reference to Socrates in The Souls of Black Folk, the essay investigates points of contact and contrast between DuBois and Socrates on the relationship of philosophy to politics and particularly on the nature of liberal education. The hope is that the comparison will contribute in some small measure to a re-assessment of these two thinkers and of the nature of education.*

“Good sir, you are an Athenian, a citizen of the greatest city with the greatest reputation for both wisdom and power; are you not ashamed of your eagerness to possess as much wealth, reputation, and honors as possible, while you do not care nor give thought to wisdom or truth, or the best possible state of your soul?” (Plato, *Apology of Socrates* 29e)<sup>2</sup>

In the midst of his *Apology*, Socrates engages in a critique of the corrupt customs and practices of the Athenians, customs that subvert the natural hierarchy of body and soul, base and noble, vice and virtue. As Socrates sees it, Athenian culture embodies a systematic subversion of the true aims of human life. This of course is one of the lessons of the Allegory of the Cave, according to which individuals in the city are trapped, with their attention fixated on immediate appearances that, in their ignorance, they take for real things.

If one were to substitute “American” for “Athenian,” then these words could have been spoken by the African-American author, W.E.B. DuBois, who appeals to Socrates in his greatest work, *The Souls of Black Folk* (DuBois 1989). One of the arguments running through *Souls* is that post-slavery, reconstruction America is increasingly falling prey to Mammon, to the deification of money, at the expense of higher aims. Northern capitalism risks a new kind of slavery, a new physiognomy of servitude, to borrow Tocqueville's arresting phrase, a servitude in which

humanity is reduced to the functional status of producer and consumer. DuBois's great conflict with Booker T. Washington is in part a dispute over the extent to which such a social, economic and political state ought to be accommodated by African-Americans.<sup>3</sup> At least in *Souls*, DuBois focuses on what he takes to be Washington's willingness to accommodate the exclusion of blacks from higher, liberal education, the sort of education whose goal is "not to earn meat, but to know the end and aim of that life which meat nourishes" (1989, 58). Moreover, the theme of images, concerning the nature and capacities of blacks as well as the true aim of human life, parading as objective truths pervades *Souls*. These are the "shades of the prison-house" (2).

Comparisons, even of thinkers from the same period and who write in response to one another, are always difficult and risky. When the thinkers are of entirely different epochs, have quite divergent goals in mind, adopt different genres, and address distinct audiences, the risks are even greater. Of course, there are many obvious differences between Socrates and DuBois. The latter is preoccupied with an issue that never surfaces as a distinct theme in Socrates or Plato, the issue of race. As DuBois famously and prophetically put it, the "problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line" (1989, 29). One might be inclined to see Socrates and Plato, along with much of classical civilization, as favoring what DuBois sees as the greatest evil of his time, slavery. Yet, DuBois himself invites such comparisons with numerous classical authors and figures, as he refers directly and favorably to Socrates, St. Francis, Shakespeare and others. DuBois's *Souls* has near masterpiece status in part because he so successfully interweaves the contemporary, American dilemma of race with many of the great debates of Western civilization. DuBois appeals to Socrates and Francis early in *Souls*, in his first discussion and critique of Booker T. Washington, a critique that takes aim at Washington's willingness to endure the exclusion of black youth from higher education. Accusing Washington of succumbing to "triumphant commercialism" (31), DuBois argues that Washington's exclusive emphasis on practical education only reinforces the prejudices of the white culture against the intellects of young blacks. It also reinforces a corrupt self-understanding in black Americans.

In much of the dispute between Washington and DuBois, the two men simply argue past one another. So, as we shall see, DuBois never argues against the importance of practical education in a trade for blacks, nor does Washington deny the importance of liberal education, in its proper place. In *Up From Slavery*, Washington observes that offering a literary training in Greek and Latin letters to those who must live in a world for which they do not have the practical skills for a trade or homemaking or even cleanliness risks rendering blacks ill-equipped to meet the demands of freedom. Whatever his reservations about liberal education, he not at all interested in promoting a “triumphant commercialism.” Instead, he wishes to foster a love of “labour, not alone for its financial value, but labour’s own sake and for the independence and self-reliance which the ability to do something which the world wants done brings” (Washington 1996, 38).

Continuing his critique of Washington, DuBois writes that, from Washington’s perspective, “the picture of a lone black boy pouring over a French grammar amid the weeds and dirt of a neglected home soon seemed to him the acme of absurdities.” To this attitude, DuBois proposes the query, “One wonders what Socrates and St. Francis of Assisi would say to this” (1989, 31). The appeal to Socrates and Francis is a bit jarring; it seems unlikely that these are authorities shared by those in Washington’s camp; nor, given the sad state of black education, would these be authorities readily recognized by the great masses in his race; finally, among the white races, at least among the most educated, these are names known but systematically excluded from any practical impact on social or economic life in America.<sup>4</sup>

The last point—the way in which America has failed to live up to the ideals animating Western civilization—is one that DuBois seems intent on driving home. Thus, DuBois’s citations of traditional Western authors is not a strategy aimed at ingratiating himself with white America; much less it is a matter of a vain display of his own erudition. Instead, it functions, initially at least, as an accusation against white America for having fallen short of, and for existing in a state contradictory to, the ideals of Western civilization. Thus does DuBois revive the Socratic tension between philosophy and contemporary mores. But Socrates and Francis have more than a polemical function in

DuBois's *Souls*. They exemplify a sense of humanity that is increasingly in danger of being forgotten in modernity, by white and black alike. Just as Socrates reproaches the Athenian citizen "because he attaches little importance to the most important things and greater importance to inferior things" (*Apology* 30a) so too DuBois contrasts the "quest of Goodness, and Beauty, and Truth" (1989, 56) with the deification of bread in America. The "Gospel of work and money... overshadows the higher aims of life" (36). Sounding a good bit like Socrates in his description of the deceptions of life within the cave or the city, DuBois curtly states, "the price of culture is a lie" (144).

In what follows we will examine a series of Socratic themes in the writings of W.E.B. DuBois: the paradoxical status of images, potentially enslaving and liberating, and the nature of liberal education; the appeal to nature as a basis for a critique of corrupt customs; and DuBois's response to the charge of elitism, a charge often leveled against Socrates as well. Such comparisons are commonly thought to be useful for the way they mutually illumine distinct authors; in this case, the comparison requires a re-thinking of common assumptions about each thinker and about the issues that connect and divide them.<sup>5</sup> As Charles Taylor has noted in his discussion of multiculturalism and the expansion of the canon in university curricula, the attempt to judge what is of value in an encounter with the "strange and unfamiliar" will likely entail openness to "strange and unfamiliar" criteria of value. The task is to develop "new vocabularies of comparison" that enable us to reach "judgments through transforming our standards" (Taylor 1994, 67). But of course any serious study of the so-called Western canon of authors must begin with the assumption that these authors are also in crucial respects "strange and unfamiliar" to us. The current exploration, merely a beginning in an important conversation between Socrates and DuBois, should aid us in seeing both authors anew.

### **The Tyranny of Images and the Nature of Liberal Education**

DuBois's peculiar version of the alienation and ignorance of the Cave is connected to the central thesis of *Souls*, concerning the doubleness of the black soul. The world of white America "yields" the black man "no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the eyes

of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (DuBois 1989, 3).<sup>6</sup> In Plato's Cave, the puppeteers (poets and politicians) carry their constructs back and forth in front of the fire in order to cast images before the eyes of bound citizens. In *Souls*, the images are formed within the minds and passions of black souls, inserted by the legacy of slavery and the continued practice of prejudice through a variety of legal and social customs. The images of racial inferiority instill in members of both the white and the black race the sub-human character of the black race. Thus, blacks are, as Socrates describes the occupants of the cave, "compelled to hold their heads unmoved through life" (Plato *Republic* 515b). America takes as an unimpeachable reality the constructed image of a slavish black race. As is the case in the *Republic*, so too in *Souls*, the first step in education, the first movement toward freedom from the enslavement of the cave, is to recognize an image as an image, or at least to recognize the conflict within the images. This is what DuBois calls "double-consciousness" or "twoness." DuBois observes: "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" (1989, 3).

The very notion of doubleness or twoness suggests that human nature itself resists reduction to a sub-human uniformity, to a unity indicative of poverty of spirit rather than a higher integration of complex parts. The experience of internal conflict in the phenomenon of twoness is the basis of DuBois's suggestion that the true philosopher or prophet of the human condition in America is not the purportedly free and superior white but the subordinate and allegedly inferior black. The latter has a better chance of recognizing the doubleness and the deception involved in the public ideology. Born within the Veil, the Negro is "gifted with second sight in this American world" (1989, 3). As Socrates insists in a number of places, the Athenians give no thought to true education, to the state of the soul, to the consideration of what DuBois calls the "riddle of existence" (1989, 58). In response to the statement of the god at Delphi, Socrates asks, "Whatever does the god mean? What is his riddle?" (*Apology* 21b). This is precisely the language DuBois uses in his eloquent description of the nature of true education.

The riddle of existence is the college curriculum that was laid before the Pharoahs, that was taught in groves by Plato, that formed the trivium and quadrivium, and is to-day laid before the freedman's sons by Atlanta University. And this course of study will not change; its methods will grow more deft and effectual, its content richer by toil of scholar and sight of seer; but the true college will ever have one goal—not to earn meat, but to know the end and aim of that life which meat nourishes. (1989, 58)

Calling to mind Socrates' persistent comparison of the true educator to the experts who train individuals in crafts, DuBois writes,

The final product of our training must be neither a psychologist nor a brickmason, but a man. And to make men, we must have ideals, broad, pure, and inspiring ends of living, not sordid money getting, not apples of gold (61).

Just as for Plato, so too for DuBois, Socratic questioning of the proper ends of human life puts the inquirer at odds with conventional assumptions, particularly with customary religious practice.<sup>7</sup> DuBois contrasts directly the South's desperate need for an institution of higher education with its current possession of religion, which he describes as "earnest, bigoted: religion that on both sides of the Veil often omits the sixth, seventh, and eighth commandments but substitutes a dozen supplementary ones" (59). Contradictions in the inherited stories and practices of the culture are, for DuBois just as for Socrates, the starting point in a dialectic aimed at liberating the intellect to formulate the questions concerning the riddle of existence.<sup>8</sup>

It is important to see that DuBois is not indifferent to pragmatic needs and concerns. The goal of education, he insists, is "not to inspire human hearts with a vision of the true, the good, and beautiful without pointing the practical way of realizing some of these dreams here and now in their own lives." Education, he argues, must balance ideals with the "greater need of specialization and technique" (1971, 301). The vast majority of black as of white Americans will devote themselves to technical education, not liberal education. For all of his emphasis on the intrinsic desirability of liberal education, he does not hesitate to speak of its practical, political and social, ramifications. One of his chief arguments against Washington's willingness to limit education to the rudi-

ments of knowledge followed by specialized training in a trade is that it leaves out of account the question who will teach the teachers, who will teach them how to understand their own work in relation to the whole of learning. Another argument concerns education as preparation for virtuous citizenship. “No secure civilization can be built in the south with the Negro as an ignorant, turbulent proletariat” (1989, 73).

For all his willingness to promote the practical ends of education, DuBois insists that we not lose sight of the one true aim of education, the end it alone can fulfill, the formulation of questions about the highest things, the ultimate mysteries of human life. Thus, he is adamantly opposed to treating education merely as a means, to an instrumental conception of the human intellect. Indeed, he stands in a long tradition of defenders of liberal education. The pursuit of knowledge is proper to human beings as human beings. Knowledge is intrinsically desirable; the anti-instrumental conception of knowledge and education does not mean that the knowledge is useless in the pejorative sense. Indeed, DuBois’s statement that education investigates the “end and aim of that life which meat nourishes” indicates that it is eminently practical. It informs how we ought to live; it is, in Platonic language, an inquiry into the good. Or, in the language DuBois himself uses to describe St. Francis’s account of education, it helps to satisfy the greater wants of the human soul, for “human service and sympathy,” for “knowledge and inspiration,” for “hope and truth and beauty” (DuBois 1971, 295).

When DuBois describes education as a “breadth and broadening of human reason, by catholicity of taste and culture” or as the “organ of that fine adjustment between real life and the growing knowledge of life, an adjustment which forms the secret of civilization” (1989, 59) he calls to mind John Henry Newman’s *Idea of a University*:

We know, not by a direct and simple vision, not at a glance, but, as it were, by piecemeal and accumulation, by a mental process, by going round an object, by the comparison, the combination, the mutual correction, the continual adaptation, of many partial notions, by the employment, concentration, and joint action of many faculties and exercises of mind. Such a union and concert of the intellectual powers, such an enlargement and development, such a comprehen-



siveness, is necessarily a matter of training....of discipline and habit.  
(Newman 1982, 114–115)

Enlargement, development, adaptation and the habituation of the intellect in the discernment of the integrated complexity of the objects of knowledge—all this is proper to the human intellect and the proper object of a truly liberal education. Indeed, the examination of education in DuBois's works may well constitute the most eloquent and most probing statement on liberal education ever written by an American.

DuBois's insistence that liberal education be open to members of the black race involves a claim about the universality of human nature and the irrepressible humanity of the black race. The attempt at suppression of humanity through the denial of opportunity for true education will not have its desired effect. You can, he writes, "make just laborers" but "they will not cease to think, will not cease attempting to read the riddle of the world" (1989, 73). There is a paradox here worthy of Socrates. Questioning the riddle of existence is an impulse, or better a natural propensity, that is at once latent within and obscured by ordinary experience and what passes for common sense. Embarking on the task of philosophical questioning is, in one respect, continuous with the questions that arise within ordinary discourse about human life; yet, in another respect, it marks a sharp departure from the unreflective way of proceeding characteristic of ordinary life. Ordinary language and conventional mores thus exhibit the same paradoxical structure as does the image in Plato; if uncritically taken for what is real and true, they are enslaving, but if seen as pointing beyond themselves, they can be liberating. The natural orientation toward knowledge and the good needs cultivation and training for its realization.

The accusing question from the *Apology*, cited at the outset, the question Socrates levels against his fellow citizens is not merely meant to be dismissive or negative. His appeal to their sense of grandeur or honor, their reputation for wisdom, and especially to their sense of shame, presupposes that they have the ability to recognize their departure from the natural order and that they are able, at least potentially, to distinguish higher from lower, noble from base. For Socrates' questions and interrogations to be anything more than ironic mockery, they must



assume that the principles of the good life are at least implicitly operative in the practices already pursued by the Athenians. Similarly, DuBois is careful not to demonize white America. His goal is for both races to achieve a “generous acknowledgment of a common humanity.”<sup>9</sup> Many of his strongest arguments appeal to the founding principles of American democracy. His program is in “large conformity to the greater ideals of the American Republic....there are today no truer exponents of the pure human spirit of the Declaration of Independence than the American Negroes” (1989, 8). But of course that embrace of the ideals of America also contains an implicit accusation, perhaps even a threat. For, if those who founded America had grounds for revolution on the basis of unjust treatment by the English government, how much more legitimate the cause of violent upheaval would the slaves have against the American government?

The possibility of irrational resistance renders the attempt to reach consensus or agreement through reasoning problematic. It is an advantage of Socratic questioning, as practiced in the dialogues, and the dialectic of DuBois that both acknowledge the reality of volitional resistance. Socrates and DuBois think that the sort of education they promote will be painful for most citizens; the removing of the shackles that bind individuals and communities to irrational opinions is not pleasant and will be resisted to the point of violence against those who deliver an unwelcome message. Both thinkers encountered the remarkable human capacity for what Stanley Cavell calls “disowning knowledge” (Cavell 2003). The task is to bring these conflicts and inconsistencies into the light of the day through discourse in the hope of engendering a kind of intellectual and moral conversion.

### **Nature, Convention, and Socratic Dialectic**

That sort of discourse, the turning of souls that Socrates describes in the *Republic* as the focus of education, presupposes both a distinction between nature and convention and a complex relationship between the two. These themes were, not surprisingly, often part of the critique of the practice of slavery among African-American authors. DuBois would have been familiar with the dialectical relationship between nature and convention from *Narrative of a Life of a Slave* by Frederick

Douglass, whom DuBois calls in *Souls* the “greatest of American Negro leaders” (1989, 35). As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. notes in his introduction to Douglass’s book, the pervasive themes of the autobiography are: the tensions between nature and nurture, the unnaturalness of slavery, and especially its incompatibility with education (Douglass 1971, xiv–xv).

For Frederick Douglass as for his pupil in this matter, DuBois, the desire for knowledge can aid in the subversion of corrupt practices. We might read DuBois’s comments about education as a gloss on Douglass’s autobiography. Throughout his *Narrative of a Life of a Slave*, Douglass turns repeatedly to the issue of education, access to which is systematically denied to slaves. When Douglass is moved from the Eastern Shore of Maryland to Baltimore, he encounters a woman of the “kindest heart and finest feelings,” the mistress of the house, who begins teaching him to read. But the husband abruptly terminates his education with the blunt statement:

A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world.... It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable.... As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy.

(Douglass 1971, 33)

Douglass receives the harsh commentary as a “special revelation” concerning the “white man’s power to enslave the black man.” Douglass concludes, “education and slavery were incompatible with one another” (38).

As Tocqueville observed in anticipation of Douglass, a defining feature of slavery in the modern American South, and in striking contrast to slavery as practiced in the ancient world, is the refusal, on pain of grave penalty, to allow slaves “to be taught to read and write” (Tocqueville 1969, 361). So contrary to nature is slavery, Douglass holds, that

to make a contented slave, it is necessary to make a thoughtless one. It is necessary to darken his moral and mental vision, and, as far as possible, to annihilate the power of reason. He must be able to detect no inconsistencies in slavery; he must be made to feel that slavery is right; and he can be brought to that only when he ceases to be a man.

(1971, 95)

In this case, a divided will, the anguish of seemingly insoluble conflict, is to be preferred to a simple unity that would result from the hollowing out of human desire and self-understanding.

Neither Douglass nor DuBois falls prey to the temptation to transform the white race into a demonic Other, a temptation to which many whites and blacks have succumbed in their envisioning of the other race. Their refusal involves an implicit affirmation of a distinctively pre-modern understanding of virtue and vice. Douglass notes that the woman who had abetted his education reversed course only after being cajoled and threatened by her husband. What inference is to be drawn from this?

She at first lacked the depravity indispensable to shutting me up in mental darkness. It was at least necessary for her to have some training in the exercise of irresponsible power, to make her equal to the task of treating me as though I were a brute. (1971, 37)

The practice of slavery frustrates the natural telos not just of the slave but also of the master; in this, Douglass implicitly affirms a teaching central to the classical ethical tradition stretching back to Plato and Socrates: vice harms the perpetrator, darkening his intellect, corrupting his experience of happiness, and blocking his access to the good. This thesis is central to the *Apology*, where Socrates tells his audience: “If you kill the sort of man I say I am, you will not harm me more than yourselves” (31d). Socrates makes an even stronger claim toward the end of the *Apology*, that a “good man cannot be harmed either in this life or in the next” (41d). Neither Douglass nor DuBois is committed to the extreme Socratic thesis that equates virtue with invulnerability to harm; they had too great an experience of tragedy and human deprivation to adopt that thesis. But they are committed to the weaker claim that vice harms the perpetrator, that it is in some way and to some extent its own punishment, and that the chief form the punishment may take is a kind of moral blindness that leaves the vicious trapped in their corruption. The great temptation for white America is not just its continued oppression of blacks but its resistance to seeing the fissure in its own soul, the way in which all of America has been transformed by the presence of Africans. Twoness is also characteristic of white souls.<sup>10</sup>

At various junctures in his book, DuBois describes the Veil separating black from white America. The color line is not a neat division between the white and black worlds; especially for black America, the attempt, coerced or voluntary, to live in the white world creates a fissure in the soul, the twoness underscored in the use of the plural “souls” in the title, *The Souls of Black Folk*. “Such a double life, with double thoughts, double duties, and double social classes, must give rise to double words and double ideals, and tempt the mind to pretense or revolt, to hypocrisy or radicalism” (1989, 142). An incessant source of pain and of the temptation to violent destruction, directed either inward or outward, internal division is preferable to a peremptory and premature oneness achieved through either pretense or revolt, hypocrisy or radicalism. A subjugated people can take one of three potential paths: revolt and revenge, conformity, or a determined effort at self-realization (34). In comparison with acquiescent conformity, revolt appears to be actively self-affirming. Certainly, DuBois thinks that in some cases revolt is justified and necessary (as is palpable in Frederick Douglass’s own autobiography), but never should it be an end in itself. For all its instrumental utility as an aid in liberation, it can also be a trap since it fails to transcend the terms of debate established by its opponent. In opposition to these two self-defeating extremes, DuBois proposes a third path, a determined effort at self-realization.

DuBois’s third way calls to mind Alasdair MacIntyre’s conception of the resolution of a conflict of traditions. For MacIntyre, a healthy tradition is not a site of stagnant repetition, but rather of ongoing conflict and debate, of argument triggered by unresolved problems within one’s own tradition and by objections voiced by members of rival traditions. Every working tradition is engaged in attempting to resolve a set of questions. In so doing, it will produce a “set of reformulations, re-evaluations, and new formulations and evaluations, designed to remedy inadequacies and overcome limitations” (MacIntyre 1988, 354).<sup>11</sup> According to MacIntyre, the Platonic dialogue inaugurates this form of inquiry as exemplary for philosophy. As we have observed, DuBois strives in *Souls of Black Folk* to appropriate segments of the Western canon. At least one of his purposes is to resolve what he takes to be the chief contemporary conflict in the tradition, the battle over the color line.

DuBois attempts to resolve a conflict of tradition not simply by exhibiting his mastery of the authoritative texts and voices of the Western tradition, but also by establishing his own voice within and against that tradition, a voice that extends the tradition in unanticipated ways. If he is successful, the result would be that the tradition is, as MacIntyre puts it, “less vulnerable to dialectical questioning and objection” (1988, 359).<sup>12</sup> Indeed, on many counts, for example, his understanding of liberal education, DuBois displays a superior understanding to that of his contemporary Americans.

Through his engagement of classical and American texts and themes, DuBois argues that contemporary America is deeply at odds with the great animating truths taught by Socrates and that the West can be saved from its own current self-destructive tendencies only by learning from what MacIntyre calls “an alien tradition.” In this case, the alien tradition “both explains why...the crisis had to happen as it did and does not itself suffer from the same defects of incoherence or resourcelessness” (1988, 365). In contrast to those who see DuBois as engaging in a regrettable act of self-assimilation, by conforming his intellect to the great white tradition of learning, DuBois is arguing, against such critics as against the naïve self-understanding of white America, that much of that great tradition is at odds with contemporary assumptions about human nature and the good life. What DuBois proposes is a way of overcoming these internal conflicts, a path that involves a fresh encounter of authors with whom we have become far too familiar. In so doing, he revives and continues a practice of rational inquiry initiated by Socrates.

### **Elitism, Alien Traditions, and DuBois’s *Apologia***

That alien tradition is most evident in the culminating chapter of *Souls*, “The Sorrow Songs,” DuBois’s commentary on “the Negro folk-song—the rhythmic cry of the slave.” In an irony lost on those who accuse DuBois of a parochial elitism, the culminating chapter of *Souls* is not a meditation on Western philosophers or poets, but on the tragic, spiritual artistry of the songs of the slaves, “a message naturally veiled and half articulate” (1989, 182). In this irony, there is both paradox and indictment. America’s highest longings, indeed the most noble aspi-

rations of human nature itself, can be detected in an art form that “has been neglected, ...has been, and is, half despised, and above all... persistently mistaken and misunderstood” (178). The paradox and the indictment, as David Levering Lewis notes, are woven into the entire structure of *Souls*. The pairing throughout of Negro spirituals with European verse advances the “then-unprecedented notion of creative parity and complementarity” of whites and blacks. DuBois’s point is that “until his readers appreciated the message of the songs sung in bondage by black people...the words written in freedom by white people would remain hollow and counterfeit” (Lewis 1993, 278). DuBois is not arguing for inclusion of an alien voice merely on the basis of its having been neglected and oppressed. The sorrowful songs embody the deepest longings of the human creature:

Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence. Sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes a faith in death, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond. But whichever it is, 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? (1989, 186)<sup>13</sup>

If the songs sing truly, they sing for all of us, although admittedly not in the same way. For them to do this, distances between ourselves and the singers of the songs must be acknowledged. But for the songs to communicate at all, distance must to some extent be bridged even as it is remembered. What we need is what Alasdair MacIntyre calls translation, the appropriation of an alien discourse as other and yet as becoming one’s own. The goal is to possess a second first language. Commenting on the pairing throughout the work of epigraphs from Negro Spirituals and from European verse, Lewis writes, “the cultural symbolism of these double epigraphs” is “profoundly subversive of the cultural hierarchy of the time” (1993, 278). In this language, we find, according to DuBois, a strange confirmation of the universality of human nature and of the link between the highest and the least longings of the human heart. The confirmation serves as much to unsettle as to buttress contemporary assumptions. As Shamoon Zamir notes,

the “historical knowledge” embodied in the spirituals “reverses the flow of knowledge and power” from any kind of elite to “the black masses” (1995, 171).

What then are we to make of DuBois’s insistence upon a distinction between the few and the many and his aspiration to transcending contingency through education? His notion of the black race being rescued by its Talented Tenth, a phrase that appears just one time in *Souls*, has seemed offensive to many. In his essay of that title, he wrote, “Was there ever a nation on God’s fair earth civilized from the bottom upward? Never; it is, ever was, and ever will be from the top downward that culture filters” (1903, 45). DuBois’s attention to the few resembles Socrates’ approach in yet another way. Socrates attracted ambitious, intelligent young men, who, if they were to be saved from the cynical quest for power, were in need of a more stringent and ennobling pedagogy than that on offer to the majority of young people. Socrates’ attempt to offer such a pedagogy, which might ultimately serve the public good, puts him in opposition to conventional society and its standards of educating youth, which merely inculcates uncritical acceptance of received opinion. Thus, he is accused of corrupting the youth. At one point in *Souls*, DuBois responds to a similar accusation. Mediocrity and uniformity are, many think, preferable to the dangerous and potentially politically destabilizing attempt to educate for excellence. Like Socrates, DuBois is also able to recognize something to which our sometimes dogmatic egalitarianism can blind us, namely, that certain types of souls will of necessity seek grandeur and excellence. To neglect the peculiar needs of these souls, to omit consideration of their types from education, is to invite them to seek a radically individualist, even destructive, path to greatness. How ought we to rightly order such souls in their quest for greatness? That is the educational question to which both Socrates and DuBois would have us return.

For all his emphasis on the color line, he often treats education as dwelling in a transcendent realm that appears free of the contingencies of class, race, or gender. Recall the following famous passage from *Souls*:

I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcom-



ing women glide in gilded halls. From out the caves of evening that swing between the strong-limbed earth and the tracery of the stars, I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn or condescension. So, wed with truth, I dwell above the Veil. Is this the life you grudge us, O knightly America?

(1989, 76)

One of the ironies here is that DuBois is more at home with famous Western authors than are contemporary educated white Americans. If there is an elitism in DuBois, it seems quite similar to that of Socrates, who insists repeatedly that, as is true of the various crafts, such as horse breeding, only the few are truly capable of producing excellent specimens. Moreover, Socrates also sees education at its peak moments as transcending cultural limitations. DuBois's experience of reading beyond the Veil calls to mind Socrates' suggestion that the afterlife would be quite pleasant indeed, were it to afford us the opportunity of questioning the great heroes and artists who have preceded us. In both Socrates and DuBois, alignment with cultural heroes and great authors is a way of driving a wedge between these authorities and the comfortable, self-serving assumptions of contemporary society. These authors cannot be held captive by the dominant culture of the time. This is a point little noticed in the contemporary debates between defenders of the canon and advocates of multiculturalism—Socrates and St. Francis can be just as alien to contemporary readers as are Douglass and DuBois.<sup>14</sup>

Thus education and critique themselves involve at least a limited transcendence of antecedent conditions. The overcoming of parochial oppositions based on race is part both of DuBois's political project and of any serious project of liberal education. DuBois, it must be admitted, does not supply or share much interest in an account of knowledge or metaphysics to undergird a complex hierarchy of images and exemplars. He does, however, have a conception of the range, suppleness, complexity, and mystery of the human person, in light of which he criticizes various sorts of reductionism. It is precisely in the Sorrow Songs, sung by the most alienated portion of humanity in America, that DuBois detects the promise that "sometime, somewhere, men will judge men by their souls and not by their skin" (1989, 186).

Instead of an unbridgeable gap between few and many, low and high, we should rather see in DuBois a Socratic argument for the mysterious interconnection between the lowest and the highest. For DuBois, Socrates is a paradoxical and instructive figure. He is at once a cultural icon and philosophical authority and someone whose life and teachings have been persistently marginalized in America. “Attached to the city as a kind of gadfly” (*Apology* 30e), Socrates opposes the city’s insouciant injustice, its hollow materialism, and its unreflective complacency; although scorned by his own community, he pricks the conscience of fellow citizens by his very presence. DuBois himself adopts a similar stance in relation to modern America. Of course, there are tensions in Plato’s depiction of Socrates, tensions between his divine calling, his role as gadfly, which is a sort of social vocation, and his vocation as a philosopher whose telos is to transcend the Cave and its murky, oppressive discourse to arrive at a transcendent vision of the Good. The philosopher, as we learn in the *Republic*, must be compelled or forced to return to the Cave, to take on his role in the city (519b–521b). Yet, the *Apology* has a different accent, on Socrates’ self-understanding as involving an ineradicable connection to Athens.<sup>15</sup> In the *Republic* itself, for example, in the very sequence in which we learn that the philosopher will only return to the city if compelled, the order of discussion in the dialogue suggests something else. Plato gives us first the divided line (510d–511e) and then the cave (514a–518b); the abstract followed by the concrete. Does this suggest that full understanding will necessitate that the ascent be followed by a descent, that the path beyond the cave is at least in part motivated by a desire to discriminate better the things and activities within the cave? This is certainly true for DuBois, whose ascent beyond the Veil is but one moment within a more comprehensive social and political calling.

For all their attention to the cultivation of the few, DuBois and Socrates share a decidedly anti-elitist trait: their refusal to adopt exclusively technical and professional language or methods of inquiry. Socrates begins the *Apology* by asking the forbearance of his hearers for his inability to speak the technical language of the courts. He will speak as he has always spoken, in a popular language befitting the marketplace, just as he had earlier given up the pursuit of technical, scientific inquir-

ies in favor of the investigation of human things (17a–18a). Similarly, DuBois admonishes us that

it is easy to lose ourselves in details in endeavoring to grasp and comprehend the real condition of a mass of human beings. We often forget that each unit in the mass is a throbbing human soul. Ignorant it may be, and poverty stricken, black and curious in limb and ways and thought: and yet it loves and hates, it toils and tires, it laughs and weeps its bitter tears, and looks in vague and awful longing at the grim horizons of human life,—all this, even as you and I. (1989, 100)

There is some similarity here to Socrates' practice of philosophical discourse in the midst of the daily life of the citizens of Athens. Socrates' adoption of ordinary language and his willingness to engage his interlocutors on their own terms contains an implicit critique of those who, in adopting a theoretical stance toward ordinary agents, treat the motivations of those they study differently from the way they conceive of themselves and their intentions.

Under Socratic questioning, ordinary language and conventional practice can be shown to contain the seeds of philosophical exploration. Even more than Socrates, who is given less credit than he should for appreciating poetry and myth, DuBois exhibits the breadth of such sources. In its admixture of prose and poetry, as in many other ways, *The Souls of Black Folk* is a book that resists classification in terms of traditional genres. It contains history, autobiography, sociology, philosophy, poetry, and lamentation. It is unified by a singular voice pursuing a unified goal. Purity of heart, as Kierkegaard put it, is to will one thing. DuBois wills the recognition of the full humanity of the black race, a recognition that cannot occur without mutual recognition of a common humanity across the color line. The book is an eloquent and cogent case for the full humanity of the black race, exemplified not just in the capacious erudition of its author, who here represents his race, but also in that author's ability to capture the full humanity of that portion of the black race that has been most reviled and mockingly dismissed as less than human.

Yet, DuBois is after more than mere egalitarianism; his writings evince a range of human capacities and callings and give testimony to the mysterious links between the lowest and the highest. Philosophy

and liberal education have the same end in view: the pondering of the riddle of human existence. Philosophy is not one isolated discourse among many but an aspiration that permeates all human discourse. As much as it may desire knowledge of the highest things and of the connections between all things, it remains a discourse at the margins of the dominant culture, both in Athens and in America, a discourse most often forgotten or oppressed. In the face of that forgetfulness, both Socrates and DuBois urge upon their contemporaries the task of remembering what it is they at some level already know. That task, the philosophical task, is the vocation exemplified and defended in both Plato's *Apology* and DuBois's *Souls*. And this is perhaps the final way in which we can detect echoes of Socrates in the writings of W.E.B. DuBois: his finest book is perhaps best understood as an *apologia*.

## Notes

1. This essay was originally read as part of a faculty development workshop ("Socratic Questions") at Villanova University, a workshop funded jointly by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Villanova Institute for Teaching and Learning. The final version profited enormously from extensive discussion with the Villanova faculty involved in the workshop, as well as from a conversation with members of the philosophy department at DePauw University. Also helpful have been the comments of my colleague at Baylor, David Corey, and my graduate student assistant, Julianne Romanello.
2. References to Plato are to dialogue and Stephanus page number; see the reference list for the editions used in this article.
3. For a recent, revisionist examination of the New Deal that sees Washington as a brave voice for self-help and free markets, see Shales 2007.
4. Although we will not focus on St. Francis in this essay, his influence on DuBois is palpable, not just in *Souls*, but even more so in the text of a commencement address he delivered at a public school in Washington, D.C. in 1907, not long after a devastating earthquake leveled San Francisco (DuBois 1971). DuBois uses that event as an occasion for considering St. Francis as a model for civilization. Why, DuBois asks, should we ponder the life of a medieval saint? Why go so far back in time to understand where we are today? By fixing in our memories the life of Francis, we will come to appreciate a certain "attitude toward wealth and distinction and the need and place of human training to emphasize this attitude." What was Francis's attitude? Francis understood that there were material and bodily needs and that satisfying these

needs was a good. But he was also convinced that there were “greater wants,” for “human service and sympathy,” for “knowledge and inspiration,” for “hope and truth and beauty.” And Francis also understood the tension between the great and the greater wants. To satisfy spiritual starvation requires some degree of renunciation of material goods. Education certainly involves the cultivation of a sense of relative importance of these different wants and goods. But education is principally about what Francis’s life was about at its core: a quest to “read life’s riddle and tell the world its true unraveling.” Francis faced the same human condition we face, and he posed the questions each of us must ask: “What am I? What is this world about me? And the word and I—how shall we work and laugh together?”

5. The comparison of the founder of Western philosophy and an African-American author may help put in question certain tired assumptions in the debate between those Amy Gutman identifies, somewhat crudely, as essentialists and deconstructions (Gutmann 1994, 16–19). In making the case for expanding the canon to include African-American authors, Gutmann asks, “Is Aristotle’s understanding of slavery more enlightening than Frederick Douglass’s? Is Aquinas’s argument about civil disobedience more defensible than Martin Luther King’s...?” (15).
6. As David Levering Lewis notes, an important source for twoness and internal division in DuBois is Hegel, particularly his famous treatment of master and slave. See Lewis 1993, 139–140.
7. On this, see particularly Plato, *Euthydemus*, 278e–282b. I am grateful to David Corey for this reference.
8. A very different sort of American appropriation of Socrates can be seen in the life and writings of Benjamin Franklin, who read Plutarch and Xenophon and practiced what he called “my Socratic method,” that of the “humble inquirer and doubter” (1982, 16). Of course, Franklin’s conception of the virtues is entirely instrumental and he exhibits no abiding interest in the great questions or in liberal education as existing in a kind of paradoxical tension with conventional life and ordinary language. His diffidence towards religion and his circumspect public expression of his own views are the foci of Jerry Weinberger’s *Benjamin Franklin Unmasked* (2005), a book that offers a Straussian interpretation of Franklin as an American Socrates. For a comparison of Franklin’s Autobiography with Washington’s *Up From Slavery*, see Sidonis Smith 1974, 30–44. Smith notes that for all the ways in which Washington uses Franklin’s story as a model, his rhetoric is void of Franklin’s irony.
9. DuBois’s generous appeal to generosity would not last. Not many years after he penned *The Souls of Black Folk*, he wrote an angry, denunciatory tract called “The Souls of White Folk” (DuBois 1990, 180–184). In that piece, he accused

the white race of asserting and pursuing a colonial project of claiming the entire earth forever. White “colonial aggrandizement,” as evidence for which he cites the first World War, is not an accidental feature of the modern, white West but its very essence. The “using of men for the benefit of a master” is not new, but the “imperial width—the heaven-defying audacity” with which it is now pursued is indeed a novelty. The “Promethean” project of white domination is, for DuBois, a peculiar invention and vice of the modern world, unknown in antiquity and the middle ages. This leaves open to the question, to which DuBois, so far as I can discern, never returns, namely, whether pre-modern Western sources and practices might provide a stance from which to appraise the corruption of modern thought and practice.

10. DuBois’s belief, evident in his essay “The Souls of White Folk,” that whiteness had become a policy of elimination of the rights of any colored people, involves a re-appraisal of this claim or at least a re-appraisal of whether the white race can be engaged rationally.
11. Compare Taylor’s discussion, in Gadamer’s language, of a fusion of horizons (Taylor 1994, 67).
12. There is at least one common influence here: Hegel.
13. As Julianne Romanello pointed out to me, a further comparison may be fruitful between DuBois’s sorrow songs and Socrates’ decision to “make music” in the *Phaedo*. In how many ways would the received views of Socrates and Plato be altered if we were attentive to what Nietzsche calls the Socrates who practices music?
14. For an unusual example of the power of canonical literary texts to provide a space for the imaginative exploration of human life in the face of totalitarianism, see Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003).
15. On this, see Corey 2005. For a reading of Plato as insisting upon the primacy of ordinary language and its latent conception of the good, see the chapters on Plato in Rosen 2002. I set aside for now the question of Plato’s final views of Socrates, even of whether all the dialogues give us a consistent picture of Socrates.

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