

# Dubois and his critics: my intervention

[Sociology](#), [Racism](#)



Dubois and His Critics: My Intervention Race is one of the most controversial concepts in today's society. At present, there is no clear definition or explanation of race. To this day, it is unclear as to whether or not it is possible to characterize and classify racial groups. The concept of race is always defined in terms of the physical and/or biological factors such as skin color. The initial classification by skin color continues to be a problem in classifying race. Humans need a shared knowledge regarding the empirical and socially appropriate identification of persons into groups in order to have a "just" social structure. W. E. B Dubois offers such an explanation that could help categorize race based on the spiritual or human constructed characteristics. "Race, then would be understood as a cluster concept which draws together under a single word references of biological, cultural, and geological factors thought characteristics of a population" (Outlaw, 20). The previous statement states that race cannot be defined purely with the biological/physical factors; the spiritual factor, which includes culture, history, must be taken into account. In fact, Dubois reasons that physical factors of race are intermingled with the spiritual factors because the definition of race can never be simply given. The focus of this paper will be an argument in favor of Dubois's following explanation of race, "what, then is race? It is a vast family of human beings, generally of common blood, language, always of common history, traditions and impulses, who are both voluntarily and involuntarily striving together for the accomplishment of certain more and less vividly conceived ideals of life" (Dubois, 230). This paper argues that Dubois does not simply attempt to transcend the nineteenth-century scientific definition of race; in fact, he attempts to

explain race. On the other hand, several critics argue that Dubois is attempting to transcend the biological definition of race. Dubois refers to these criteria as the spiritual factors. In order to understand the origin of these arguments, a brief background on "The Conservation of Races" is provided below. In the essay, "The Conservation of Races," Dubois discusses the belief that American Negroes have in unequal opportunities among the races. Dubois infers that unequal opportunities among races create significant issues. For instance, there will be a lack of unity among the Negro race, and the Negro race as an institutionalized structure will face oppression from economically driven outside structures. Dubois goes on to analyze race from two particular criteria: spiritual and physical factors. In addition, Dubois supports his claims with a level of theoretical hesitation. This theoretical hesitation is evident in the wording of the supporting data for his propositions and/or claims. The essay deduces that physical factors can help define race. Dubois approaches the first criteria of race, physical factor, by collecting scientific data. Dubois writes that scientific studies points to intermingling of races (Dubois, 229). The data and words choices of Dubois infer that the physical factors are based on only the observational characteristics of race such as color, hair, cranial measurements and language (Dubois, 229). Dubois goes on to say that the evolution of the human does not correlate well with physical racial differences. However, Dubois says that society still uses "subtle" (Dubois, 230) differences to categorize the races. Dubois mentions that using these differences transcends scientific laws. Once again these opposing thoughts and concepts are proof of the Dubois's theoretical hesitation. Dubois informs his audience

that physical differences, although commonly used, are not enough to divide the races into particular groups. "...yet no mere physical distinctions would really define or explain the deeper differences—the cohesiveness and continuity of these groups. The deeper differences are spiritual, psychical, differences—undoubtedly based on the physical, but infinitely transcending them" (Dubois, 231). In addition, the spiritual factor takes into account the deeper ideals than the physical/observational factors. The spiritual includes factors such as history, music, religion, language and ideals. For Dubois, the conservation of race is essential because each race possesses unique cultural traits and skills to provide to society. The theoretic hesitation allows Dubois to keep the topic on a broad range. Dubois states that the issues of race are so incessant self-questioning and the hesitation that arises from it (Dubois, 230). Dubois does this by using words of uncertainty, not definite, which allows him to change the direction of his claim to the opposite end of the spectrum. Proof of Dubois' theoretical hesitation can be found throughout the essay. In the following quote, the use of the words "generally" and "always" infers that the answer to the question of race is not easily formulated in spite of scientific law. Overall, Dubois discusses two criteria that can be used in classifying race. He portrays the physical factor as scientific law and the spiritual factor as morals. The consistent hesitation in Dubois argument proves to show that Dubois is attempting to provide an explanation for race using the spiritual factors. In final analysis, Dubois argues that race can never be defined and explained using only one of these criteria, by stating that they are intermingled and intersected. Appiah is the main critic who argues that Dubois attempts to transcend the biological

factors of race. Appiah interprets Dubois's explanation of race as a definition that creates a set of criteria that can be used to know whether or not two individuals belong to the same race. Appiah assumes that Dubois's conditions in explaining race can be taken individually to define race. Overall, Appiah's argument analyzes every condition of Dubois's explanation individually. His goal is to refute Dubois's claim that he transcended the nineteenth-century scientific conception of race. Appiah argues that the common vast family and common blood cannot be criterions in defining race. He believes that these two criteria signify a notion of shared ancestry and/or common biology. From this Appiah argues that Dubois does not transcend the scientific definition. Dubois's use of the expression, " vast family" to define race when carefully analyzed in context suggests that he rejects all notions that racial families are linked biologically or by common blood. This does not necessarily mean that families are joined by acts of individual choices. As a matter of a fact, Dubois believes that although families are largely of common blood, he allows the possibility that there exist some racial families that are united by a social front. Let us turn now to Appiah's argument against Dubois's " common history" condition. Here, Appiah argues that one cannot determine whether two people belong to a particular race by " establishing that the history of that race is the history of a race to which each of them belongs, unless one can appeal to criteria other than " common history" to determine whether these individuals belong to that race" (Williams, 42). Therefore, Appiah argues that Dubois's argument is circular. In order to refute this argument, it is ideal to point that Appiah is analyzing the " common history" criterion individually. Since common history is not the

only criterion that Dubois used, it makes Appiah's argument invalid. The other criterions in Dubois's definition establish the race to which two individuals belong prior to using their common history. Overall, Appiah incorrectly interprets Dubois's attempt to explain race because he looks at Dubois's arguments separately and disregards the "cluster concept." Appiah argues that Dubois fails to establish his argument because he does not articulate a logical sociohistorical conception of race. In defense of Dubois, it is crucial to state that he attempts to explain race by providing a broad definition using "generally" and "always." In other words, Dubois is offering an explanation and not a definition of race. In addition, Dubois's claims are unambiguous because he does not create a definition set in stone. This is seen in Dubois's theoretical hesitation in his arguments. Dubois is not trying to define race a "natural kind" or a "heritable racial essence." In fact, Dubois attempts to explain the biological factors of race using the spiritual or human constructed values. Although Dubois does transcend the 19th century biological definition of race, he also explains the different roles that different races have on society based on the spiritual differences. "Although the wonderful developments of human history teach that the grosser physical differences of color, hair and bone go but a short way toward explaining the different roles which groups of men have played in Human Progress" (Dubois, 230). The previous quote supports the fact that Dubois is trying to explain race. This can be said because the physical racial differences do not explain all the differences of men's history. Dubois claims that human history is the history of the "group of men" or "races." Dubois believes that a race plays a role in history because every race has a "

spiritual message" to deliver. First and foremost, it is vital to argue that Dubois does transcend the nineteenth century definition of race. He does this by rejecting the view that the physical differences between races explain their spiritual differences. Dubois argues that spiritual differences have historical, social, and cultural causes that are themselves not causally reducible to biological differences. In addition, Dubois's definition can be seen as an explanation of the nineteenth century racial definition of race. In reconsidering this definition, it is imperative to note Dubois' distinct uses of the terms " generally" and " always. " The claim that a race is " generally" of the same blood shows that Dubois implies there are exceptions to the conditions of " common blood" and " common language. " Gooding Williams argues in favor of Dubois in this case. " Though Dubois begins his definition of ' race' by invoking the biological notion of a family, his use of the term ' generally' in this context, both before and after that invocation, suggests the view that at least some racial families are no " blood unities" (Williams, 49). Although race differences have followed mainly physical differences, the deeper differences are spiritual. This argument is the negation of the biological definition. Furthermore, Dubois argues that members of a given race " always" share a history, traditions, impulses and strivings. These criteria offer an alternative to the scientific definition of race by providing a thoroughly historical and sociological definition. This suggests that Dubois believes that two members are of the same race if, and only if they share common history, traditions, impulses and strivings. Williams argues that Dubois's sociohistorical and stated definition of race draws its motivation from a theoretical belief in the possibility of nonbiological explanations of spiritual

differences between the races. The opponents to this argument may argue that Dubois's argument has some tension. They would make this argument because Dubois could not find a word that could define the changeable factors in the sociohistorical and the physical. In other words, it seems as though Dubois's hesitation is proof that he is not an expert in his argument. In order to refute this claim, it is pertinent to note that Dubois argument is not a fixed definition, in fact, it is an explanation. The broad argument allows for an extensive interpretation of race because the racial concept is ever-changing. In final analysis, Dubois claims that spiritual differences between the races can be explained on a nonbiological basis by appealing to causal factors such as " common history, common laws and religion, similar habitats of thought and a conscious striving for certain ideals of life" (Williams, 51). References Boxill, Bernard. Dubois on Cultural Pluralism. Boston: Bedford Books, 1996. Pdf. Dubois, W. E. B. The souls of Black Folk. Boston: Bedford Books, 1996. Pdf. Gooding-Williams, Robert. Outlaw, Appiah and " The Conservation of Races". Boston: Bedford Books, 1997. Pdf. Outlaw, Lucius. " Conserve" Races? In Defense of W. E. B Du Bois. Boston: Bedford Books, 1997. Pdf.