

Kant's Cosmopolitanism and the Philosophy of History:  
A Du Boisian Notice on the Moral Significance of Race

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Kant's account of the nature of historical progress is tied to his cosmopolitanism, which ascribes a purposive quality to nature as a regulative ideal of practical reason. The latter anchors the normative orientation of rational agents, precipitating their reconciliation to modern republican institutions that protect basic rights and liberties in spite of morally heterogeneous ends. As part of his philosophy of history, Kant posits the 'unsocial sociability' of rational agents in converging on the common end of founding and defending a modern republican state. Rawls inherits a feature of Kant's view of historical progress in this account of the function of reflective equilibrium in generating an overlapping consensus. Rawls maintains that conflicting comprehensive doctrines are ultimately reconciled in a higher purposive unity through free participating in modern social and political institutions. Consequently, such a resolution reveals the implicit telos of conflicting comprehensive doctrines for the promotion of the collective ends of a just state; reconciling differences in citizens' conception of the good inadvertently actualize this implicit telos. In my paper, I propose an intervention into Kant and Rawls's account of historical progress by introducing Du Bois's racialist doctrine (1897 & 1903). In spite of its reputation for defending a controversial, metaphysically-robust view of racial identity, Du Bois argues that his racialism is best understood as a politically liberal doctrine, one that advances a philosophy of history. His racialism is a conceptual apparatus for conceptualizing the nature of political progress in modern nation-states founded on the racial traumas of slavery and Jim Crow segregation. Du Bois argues that these original, but unacknowledged, racial traumas inform (the racist overtones of) the resistance to the institutional protection of basic rights and liberties. Du Bois argues that the doctrine, then, encourages citizens to confront how their habits of citizenship evince an 'unsociability' towards non-white citizens. In affirming a racialist doctrine, Du Bois submits that it is a mechanism for hastening political progress because it exacts a civic obligation for American citizens to confront the racialized overtones of their resistance to the institutional protection of basic rights and liberties for their fellow non-white citizens. This 'unsociability' is revealed to be neither ascribable to the implicit purposive structure of nature (a la Kant) nor to the implicit purposive structure of a rational decision procedure and the 'spontaneous' uptake of its outcomes in modern institutions (a la Rawls). Rather, it arises from a historical legacy of racial traumas that implicitly racialize the interpretation of the political legitimacy of public claims, contributing to the undermining of the moral standing of non-white citizens. Historical progress requires confronting past racial traumas, perpetrated by the state, in order to secure the universal protection of rights and liberties for all citizens.