

Duboisian Leadership through Standpoint Epistemology

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ABSTRACT

I outline a defence of a naive group-level standpoint epistemology. According to this view then under conditions often met in real situations of oppression, it is the majority view on questions of import to those marginalised by oppression that ought to be treated as deference worthy. I further argue that this view is inspired by and coheres well with various doctrines laid out and defended by W.E.B. Du Bois, making this a recognisably Duboisian vision of standpoint epistemology. The central conceptual move is to relate principles of social epistemology under conditions of oppression that were of great interest to Du Bois with the conditions for group accuracy that have been studied by social-choice theorists working on Condorcet’s Jury Theorem, as well as contemporary epistemological work on group polarisation. I argue that once these elements are brought together a surprisingly cogent case for deference to the simple majority view of the marginalised can often be made.

1. INTRODUCTION

There is clearly some sense in which Du Bois was an egalitarian. He argued for the social equality of races (Du Bois 1920/1996) and the enfranchisement of women (Du Bois 1920/1999). Scholars call him a “black radical democrat” (Marable 2015) and an early exponent of what we now call “epistemic democracy,” the view that democracy is the best system of government because it is able to pool and make use of the dispersed knowledge possessed by everyone in the population (e.g., Landemore 2020, 7). One sees why when one reads stirring quotes from him like “life, as any man has lived it, is part of that great national reservoir of knowledge without use of which no government can do justice” (Du Bois 1973, 154). Not only justice but basic matters of efficacy were at stake for Du Bois in democratic government. As he said, “[d]emocracy is not so much a way of protecting ourselves from aggression as a way of getting the world’s work done, and done in the best and most scientific way” (Du Bois 1950/1985, 270). Here is someone who saw everyone as embodying a valuable perspective which, if given the chance, may contribute to the commonweal by being given a fair hearing and having it inform and enrich collective decisions.

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But this characterisation, while not inaccurate, misses out on something important about Du Bois. For Du Bois also maintained a theory of quasi-aristocratic leadership. This was famously expressed in his (1903) essay “The Talented Tenth,” wherein he argued that an educated elite of African Americans should guide the masses. In later life, 1948, he whittled this down to a theory of the “guiding one hundredth” (Rabaka 2003)! Political philosophers have extracted from his works a romantic theory of organic leadership (Gooding-Williams 2011) and norms for conscripting informal leaders (Salkin 2021) along with for how they should then lead (Salkin 2022). To be fair Du Bois did seem to grow wary of the potential class implications of this. For instance in the late 50s he characterised his younger view as: “most people, including myself, long assumed that the American Negro, forced into social unity by color caste, would achieve economic unity as a result, and rise as a mass of labourers led by intelligent planning to a higher unity with the labouring classes of the world” (Du Bois 1958/1985, 297). But then he reflected that emerging class differentiation meant that the “intelligent leadership” he had hoped for could not be relied upon. However, even if he eventually demurred from this less egalitarian aspect of his thought, he did not unambiguously denounce it. The struggle remains for us to reconcile it with his egalitarianism.

Some scholars see the two aspects of his thought as simply irreconcilable, with the romanticism of a self-asserting leadership cadre being contradictory to the social equality he elsewhere endorsed (Rodman 2021). Others have responded by trying to develop theories of democratic leadership (Davari 2018) or public intellectualism (Basevich 2020b) consistent with Duboisian principles. For my part, I am going to attempt a far less plausible reconciliation than any of these previous efforts, which I hope shall at least be interesting.

For I am going to argue that Du Bois egalitarian and aristocratic moments can be reconciled through seeing him as committed to a standpoint epistemology embodied in leadership. His version of standpoint epistemology dispenses with the “achievement thesis”; and I shall argue it is better off for this. While Du Bois could not have known of this exact argument, it is based upon premises he endorsed, embodies a style of reasoning he was committed to and occasionally practiced, and allows one to maintain some core Duboisian ideas about epistemic democracy and also romantic leadership. What is more, I rescue what might be thought of as a “naive” view of standpoint epistemology, showing it has more merit than it is generally credited with.

To be clear about the essay’s relationship to Du Bois’s work, I am not sure it has a clear relationship to Du Bois’s work. The position here described is at minimum inspired by his views—I will try to point out connections and commonalities to claims Du Bois defended. I will also claim that my view has features that would provide further support for and unify various positions Du Bois undoubtedly held. Sometimes I even (no doubt vainly) kid myself that this is something like a view he might have endorsed if only some of the conceptual machinery had been available to him when he wrote. But at the same time: there can be no doubt that Du Bois did not in fact endorse this position—if for no other reason than that some of the concepts and results it relies on would not have been available in his time. Any stated links to his positions are speculative at the best of times, and one may reasonably doubt the links go much beyond that of inspiration. Ultimately the best I can say is that it is a position that is about as Duboisian as the typical “Humean” position in analytic philosophy is actually that of Hume. And if David Lewis can get away with it, why can’t I?

2. THE STYLISED SCENARIO OF INQUIRY

In its more applied forms standpoint epistemology explains things like why we should believe women regarding workplace sexual harassment, or racial minorities regarding harmful racist jokes, etc. Feminist standpoint epistemologists are interested in scenarios like the following: a

young woman is considering entering a new workplace, school, or other sort of organised social environment. She is aware of the possibility of bullying, sexual harassment, or other manifestations of injustice and oppression, and would like to know if the disciplinary measures in place suffice to constrain and punish offenders while keeping victims and complainants safe. How should she inquire into this?

The answer feminist standpoint epistemologists give will be along the lines of: women, or those gender marginalised more generally, will have a distinct and superior insight into this question. The young women in this scenario would be better off making enquiries among the women or gender marginalised than she would relying on other sources. For instance Bowers explicates this as follows:

Feminist standpoint theorists make three principal claims: (1) Knowledge is socially situated. (2) Marginalized groups are socially situated in ways that make it more possible for them to be aware of things and ask questions than it is for the non-marginalized. (3) Research, particularly that focused on power relations, should begin with the lives of the marginalized. (Bowers 2011)

In our young woman's scenario, who had the pertinent knowledge was bound up with how people are situated with regard to gender hierarchies; those marginalised were more likely to have pertinent information. And in researching this environment the young woman was wise to start by learning about their experiences.

Du Bois in fact shared the core commitments of feminist standpoint epistemology as outlined by Bowers. For instance, he claimed as an advantage for his field researchers looking into the situation of Negro farm labourers in the South that they were born and raised in the pertinent communities and thus had insider knowledge of this downtrod community (Du Bois 1899/1980). He also argued that to understand the social mores of life in towns in the South one really had to understand the colour line as it was experienced from the Negro side (1904/2013). Finally, as shall be pertinent given how my argument develops, Du Bois was also clear that the case for democracy went for micro-environments providing particular services as well as the state as a whole. As he put it, "let us not forget that unless democracy can cope with the broader services of public welfare it is idle to believe it can be trusted to govern the political state" (Du Bois 1950/1985, 271). Du Bois both in theory and practice thus evinces a commitment to members of marginalised groups being so situated as to have an advantage in asking and answering pertinent questions while governing their own affairs.

Via a social-choice theoretic interpretation of such scenarios, I will argue the Duboisian and feminist standpoint theorist's points are vindicated in cases of core interest. The marginalised will be understood as people significantly more likely to have situationally pertinent kinds of negative experience. Throughout I assume it is possible for the inquirer to tell who is and is not in the marginalised group. I likewise assume there is just one key proposition the inquirer is concerned with. In fact working out who is to be trusted can be very vexed (Ruiz and Dotson 2017) and if things get even a bit more logically complex than inquiring into a single yes/no proposition all sorts of difficulties arise (Dietrich and List 2007). But we have to start somewhere and here will do.

3. LEADERS AS THE CHAMPION OF STANDPOINTS

Broadly speaking a standpoint is "a critical perspective on the social world that takes as its starting point the social location of some particular group" (Toole 2021, 342). A standpoint should be both somehow intimately related to the perspectives of marginalised people, yet not

just identical with the opinion of any particular marginalised person. Standpoint theorists usually commit to an “achievement thesis” (Toole 2021, §1.2), according to which in some sense one must work to actually attain the standpoint. Standpoints are then understood as the result of study and reflection, not something one gets for free along with oppression.

But this combination of commitments generates difficulties. In so far as one stresses the need for achieving something beyond mere membership in the group, one divorces the standpoint more and more from what people in the pertinent group actually think. There is no guarantee that any given person or group have actually done the requisite study. Indeed, oppression may leave marginalised people harried and cut off from educational resources so they have great difficulty doing this. Occasions of just this sort were a persistent concern of Du Bois (e.g., Du Bois 1912, 83). But cutting off the standpoint from the actual group whose perspective it is meant to represent is anathema (Collins 1997). One might thus retreat to positions wherein the standpoint is more like whatever the oppressed person sitting at the back of the Atlanta omnibus would think.

But then it seems to retain the idea that standpoints are guides to truth one must posit an epistemic advantage inhering in simply being part of the pertinent group. This simply seems false, and raises the spectre of some hidden essentialism (Wylie 2003, 27). It can even end up excusing poor behaviour from majority group members (Tilton *forthcoming*). So the challenge is to articulate a version of a standpoint preserving the sense that it really is an epistemically superior perspective of the marginalised, while avoiding essentialism or attributions of mystical insight.

To see how Du Bois may respond to this dilemma let us define a standpoint more carefully. In line with earlier theorists (Okruhlik 1994, 41; Collins 1997; Harding 2013) insistence that a standpoint must in some sense be a group-level phenomenon, I take standpoints to be group perspectives. But just as we cannot guarantee the marginalised have achieved a standpoint, we also cannot guarantee that there has been any process of collective affirmation, or the construction of mechanisms enabling collective epistemic action, as would be required on stringent theories of group belief (e.g., Gilbert 1987; Lackey 2017). As such, I take the least demanding view—on a given question the standpoint of the pertinent marginalised is the most popular view on the matter at hand, which I interpret as the winner of a hypothetical majority vote on the proposition in which all those affected and marginalised take part. Of course one may prefer a super majority or another more complex way of counting the votes—all I mean to insist on here is that a standpoint be something in the spirit of a hypothetical majoritarian amalgamation of the individual group members’ perspectives on the question at hand.

And now the central claim: it is this naive understanding of a group standpoint that the Duboisian romantic leader was to take up and be a champion for. As I understand the successful Duboisian leader, they are quite simply someone who is able to give the best case for the perspective of their group, which I understand in the naive sense as simply the majority opinion of that group. A Duboisian leader is thus someone who learns of then puts forward the best case for the group standpoint on issues at hand. Think, for instance, of a good union rep. They might also enter our stylised inquiry scenario, in their case to learn of the membership’s view on the question at hand so as best to agitate for it.

That Du Bois might be sympathetic to the idea that such a standpoint would be worth championing is suggested by three elements of his work. First, when trying to ascertain and put forward group opinion of various classes in the 7th ward of Philadelphia, he seems to have literally polled everyone in the town on all the issues he was concerned with and then tried to amalgamate and present the resulting view himself (Du Bois 1899, ch. 18). This should be seen as in line with Du Bois’s habit of more-or-less subtly suggesting that he himself embodied the ideal Duboisian leader (Gooding-Williams 2011, ch. 4). Of course Du Bois does not

uncritically promote the perspective of everyone he polls—for one thing there is internal disagreement, and in any case he was willing to depart from black popular movements (Shelby 2021, 51)—but he does recognisably present something like a sympathetic portrait of what the modal 7th ward black Philadelphian would say. More broadly Du Bois’s whole organisation of the scientific endeavour under his control (Morris 2015; Wright II 2017) reflected this pattern of distributing information gathering to many, then attempting an authoritative summary by an ideal leadership figure like himself (Bright 2023). Du Bois was well aware of the epistemic benefits of majoritarian information amalgamation (Heesen et al 2019) and this is reflected in his scientific work.

The second source I would draw on for this is Du Bois’s short story “Of the Coming of John” (Du Bois 1903/1994, ch. 13). Here Du Bois presents a failed exemplar of Duboisian leadership. John, initially with much support from his home town, is sent away to be educated in the best knowledge and technique of the best white schools in the country. He excels, and after facing rejection from the white world John decides to come home and aid in the uplift of his people. However, when he gets home and starts preaching his gospel of progress he horrifies his former folk, who now see him as an atheist and whose innovations seem strange and blasphemous to them. I understand one moral of this story to be as follows: John may well have been intelligent and educated, but he could not plausibly lead his people because the perspective he had come to represent was no longer theirs. Right or wrong, it is not the place of a Duboisian leader to simply promote the truth or best course of action to the best of their knowledge. That is what John did, and he failed. Rather, the Duboisian leader must promote the best version of the view of those they would lead. This must reflect what the general sensibility actually holds to; there was a supermajority in favour of a kind of old-school Protestant Christianity, and John’s mistake was premising his leadership on the rejection of that. Majority opinion is to be respected.

Third and finally I think this is suggested in Du Bois’s work on the nature of race itself. Du Bois fought a rearguard action on behalf of the scientific acceptability of the notion of “race” by framing it as a cultural rather than biological phenomenon (Du Bois 1897/1996). Du Bois was motivated by a conviction—plausibly inherited from Herderian influences in his young education (Appiah 2014, 46–48)—that each race had a distinctive “message” for the world. This idea was not unique to him among black intellectuals of his time (see, e.g., Jeffers [2016]) but Du Bois was perhaps unusual in plausibly founding his entire notion of race upon the idea (Jeffers 2013). Du Bois was thus insistent (see, e.g., [1903/1994, ch. 1]) that each race should be allowed to develop and bring forth its message on its own terms, the better to contribute to the eventual universal human synthesis. I claim the naive standpoint well interprets this notion—the racial perspective on a matter is just the position which most members of that race would be inclined to endorse were they polled. In fact, almost anything more substantial than this would only worsen the circularity that Appiah (1985) identified in Du Bois’s theory of race, by requiring a substantive prior theory identifying genuine racially apt cultural beliefs over and above the beliefs people actually endorse. Now, Du Bois clearly thinks this message can be better or worse developed at any given time—so he is not just endorsing the majority view whatever it happens to be. Just like, as we shall see, this naive standpoint epistemology does not always endorse the group standpoint as correct. But I do maintain that the job of the race leader is simply to faithfully amalgamate and intelligently transmit the race message, right or wrong, to provide its independent input into human progress.

I thus claim that the naive view of a group standpoint on a question—namely, the view that would be endorsed by the majority of the group if polled on the matter in a hypothetical election wherein everyone votes honestly—is just the view which the Duboisian leader is meant to give voice to. This would explain his own practice in research of making use of majoritarian amalgamation of perspectives in order to put forward the group view. It would be consistent

with his warning expressed through fiction against straying from what the majority belief deems acceptable if one wants to lead. And it would explain how racial leaders are meant to relate to the racial message of the group they belong to.

What is more, not only does this make for a nice bit of Du Bois exegesis but this naive perspective on the nature of a standpoint also immediately resolves some problems internal to standpoint epistemology. There is a clear sense in which the group perspective is related to that of the members of the group. If there are k members of the marginalised group in a given town or workplace etc., then as it were each individual's beliefs constitute $1/k$ th of the ground of the standpoint being as it is. It hence also explains why if one wants to know what the marginalised's standpoint is one ought ask actual members of the group, rather than (say) academics who have helpfully already read enough theory to know what the marginalised should believe after due consciousness raising. (Note that this requirement that one talk to actual members of the group would be in line with Du Bois's frequent scathing critiques of "car window sociology"—people purporting to speak for or about a group based only on reflecting on their superficial engagement with the group, like musing on them as one drove through their quarter of town [Morris 2015, 25].) Against any such presumptions to speak for a group, what is always needed, per Duboisian empiricism, is actual sustained inquiry regarding what people in the group actually do and say (Du Bois 1898, 18–19; Du Bois 2000, 42–43). And the naive standpoint theory makes it abundantly clear why that is so; the group perspective just is composed from what such people would do or say, there is no more immediate way of accessing it. On the flip side it explains why no one member of the marginalised automatically has the standpoint just in virtue of being in the group. The only thing coordinating the beliefs of the marginalised are any experiences and information they have in common. This leaves room for a lot of variation by individual. In any moderately large group, it would take serious inquiry to work out what the majority believes.

We shall now see how this naive view of a standpoint not only preserves a link to actual marginalised people without any essentialism but also provides an easy argument for the claim of epistemic advantage. I.e., it plausibly explains why seeking out and adopting the standpoint of the marginalised is a good idea for someone who wishes to understand their world and act accordingly to change it. And for our exegetical purposes it explains why a Duboisian leader may plausibly hope to be transmitting a perspective worth listening to, even as they are subordinating their own view to that of the group.

4. CONDORCET RESULTS

The Condorcet Jury Theorem (CJT) says that under certain conditions a majority vote is more likely to be correct than not in deciding whether some proposition is true, and that as one adds more voters the group becomes ever more reliable to the point of infallibility in the infinite limit. The conditions as initially stated were that all voters were equally reliable and honest, that they have a greater than chance probability of voting for the correct answer, and that conditional on the truth the voters' opinions are formed independently of one another. Originally put forward by Condorcet as part of a defence of democracy as a form of government (Baker 1975, 333–42) it has since been generalised and sophisticated in a number of ways (Grofmen et al. 1983; Goodin and Spiekermann 2018). On at least one occasion in praising democracy Du Bois made a claim that seems to signal awareness of the general shape of the result:

Democracy is not merely a distribution of power among a vast number of individuals. It is not merely majority rule based on the fact that the majority has the physical force to prevail. It is something far more fundamental than this: it rests upon the fact that when we have proven

knowledge, interpreted through the experience of a large number of individuals, it is possible through this pooled knowledge and experience to come to decisions much more fundamental and much more far reaching that can be had in any other way. This is so clear and logical that it needs no proof, but rests on certain fundamental assumptions. The people participating in this pool of democracy must be alive and well, they must know the world which they are interpreting and they must know themselves. (Du Bois 1945, 7–8)

And Du Bois applied Condorcet style reasoning in his scientific practice (Heesen et al. 2019).

To recap, we are working within a paradigm standpoint-epistemology scenario. An inquirer seeks information about some question. E.g., are members of the group likely to experience bullying or harassment, will authority figures have their back in case of abuse, is it safe to still be in town after sundown, or is a particular person bigoted? To inquire they may either ask around in general, restrict their inquiry to asking the marginalised, restrict their inquiry to asking the dominant, or just guess themselves. As before we assume it is a single logically simple proposition they wish to learn of, and that they can infallibly identify the marginalised versus the dominant. We add to these simplifying assumptions that they are able to gather and amalgamate the perspectives of the entire group by independent inquiries of each member, so they may learn the majority view of either the total or either subset in question. This is the situation of our aspirant Duboisian leader, who wishes to know the standpoint on the question of interest that they may best present and promote it. We shall show that the standpoint so understood is liable to be not only the perspective the leader happens to be bound to promote, but likely of interest because it is epistemically better founded than its alternatives.

The argument now turns on some changes to the standard Condorcet set up drawn from Goodin and Spiekerman (2018), retaining the assumption that people vote honestly. First, we do not need to assume that everyone is equally reliable and this probability of getting the truth is more than 50%. We only need to assume that for the problem at hand the voters are on average more reliable than chance. This divorces what we are assuming from any worrying essentialism or mystic insight, and permits the Duboisian conviction that some amongst us are especially talented. Second, we state both our competence and independence assumptions through the idea of a ‘best responder’. I quote a summary article:

Take the epistemic situation to encompass: the actual state of the world, the evidence available, the influential thought leaders in the community, and the shared biases and cognitive limitations that cannot be avoided by any person, and so on. That is to say, the epistemic situation encompasses all the common causes of voters’ beliefs. This situation is either truth-conducive or not with a certain probability. If it is, a *best responder*, an agent who interprets the given evidence in the best possible way, will find the right answer, otherwise they will fail to do so. (Bright 2019, 566)

If people are in a truth-conducive situation, vote independently conditional on that epistemic situation, and on average mimic the vote of the best responder at better than chance rates, then we gain a strengthened CJT. In particular, it is still true that as one adds more voters the group becomes ever more reliable. Our final assumption is that the inquirer themselves, the putative Duboisian leader, is only at most as competent as the average member of the marginalised group. This last assumption, it is true, Du Bois would probably not grant in his own case. But it preserves a sense that Duboisian leadership may be open to ordinary group members. In any case the logic of Condorcet arguments entails that even an above-average inquirer is quickly outperformed by a moderately sized group. Thus our assumption merely simplifies the statement of the argument.

We can see immediately that the option of believing the amalgamated opinion of marginalised people, in our terminology adopting the standpoint of the marginalised, will typically do better than just guessing oneself. This follows if you grant that the conditions of the strengthened CJT hold for the marginalised's standpoint and note that comparing the standpoint of the marginalised with our averagely competent inquirer just amounts to comparing the results of two votes, one with the bigger electorate.

Of course more complexly picked out subsets of either of these groups could be formed, but these would typically involve stretching our already contentious assumption about the inquirer being able to identify who they should consult. For instance, it is already nontrivial to assume the inquirer can pick out all and only the black people in a work place in order to inquire about antiblack racism. The more complex subset of interest might be something like—all and only the black people in this workplace who are accurate more than 70% of the time on questions like the one faced now. But just on its face I hope it is apparent why this is a much more demanding and less plausibly achievable identification task than just asking all the black people what they think. We hence set these complex subsets aside for our exploration of the simple paradigm scenario.

And note that it is indeed plausible that for the paradigm scenarios of standpoint theory the conditions of the strengthened CJT will hold. The marginalised will not form their opinions fully independently due to things like shared experience of oppression leading to similar reasoning patterns or having conversations around the work place. But per the new independence condition more or less anything short of voting based on seeing how other people voted will be OK. Since the vote to attain the marginalised's standpoint is purely hypothetical that is literally impossible. And that the marginalised will, on average, do better than chance at detecting manifestations of oppression is certainly a Duboisian thesis.

The humble would-be leader should thus agree the marginalised standpoint is more likely to be reliable than theirs. We will now consider whether it would be better to restrict attention to the marginalised standpoint, take the dominant's view, or take the view of the whole group.

4.1 Dominance induces ambiguity

There is a deep asymmetry between the evidence provided by negative experiences and simply lacking negative experiences. If one experiences bullying or harassment or bigotry (etc.) and then sees how the institution responds, one's evidence more or less settles the kind of question we are interested in. And by assumption it is mostly the marginalised who have such experiences. Whereas simply not having any such experiences leaves things quite open either way—after all in such a case one is being asked what for all you know is a counterfactual question: how *would* the institution respond to bullying, or *if I were* to learn this person's opinion of group X would it be bigoted, etc? So the evidence of the marginalised is likely to be far less ambiguous than the evidence of the dominant.

But if voters are conditioning on ambiguous evidence, then, even holding the other conditions of our strengthened CJT fixed, the theorem does not hold (Wollesen *ms.*). So unlike with the standpoint of the marginalised, the standpoint of the dominant comes with no equivalent CJT-based epistemic guarantee.

Dorst has further shown that rational agents responding to ambiguous evidence can predictably polarise in response to a question, and has provided experimental evidence that people polarise as he predicts (Dorst *forthcoming*). Notably the scenario Dorst (*forthcoming*, §7) uses in his experimental set up resembles our hypothetical workplace—he shows that in scenarios wherein one can have experiences that simply determine the answer to a question, but not having such an experience does not clearly speak in favour of a given answer, people predictably polarise.

Taken together with the above we should expect such polarisation to occur, and to be to the epistemic disadvantage of the dominant. More marginalised people are more likely to have experience of decisive events that settle the questions we are concerned with, compared with members of dominant groups. This will predictably lead to divergences in group opinion, and on average we should expect the marginalised perspective to be the more accurate. The dominant opinion may even anti-predict, and certainly is not as reliable as the marginalised perspective.

Before moving on I note my argument here resembles one from [Bright \(2018\)](#). He defended a more individualist standpoint epistemology, but on grounds similar to the above. He concludes that an inquirer in something like our paradigm situation should ask a random member of the marginalised group rather than ask a random member of the dominant group, vindicating core theses of standpoint epistemology. Such an individual comparison may be analogised to Du Bois comparing his insights to that of a white bourgeois in (1940/1986, ch. 6). Bright's reasoning is sound and compatible with the account here, but the naive interpretation of standpoint theory presented here is preferable since it better accommodates the claim that standpoints are collective rather than individual (though I return to this matter in the next section). As mentioned, Du Bois's theory of race clearly commits him to the idea that there is something like a group perspective, and his theory of leadership suggests that one does well to embody it. The Condorcet-based arguments here do better at capturing all these facts together.

4.2 Marginalisation shapes communication networks

By choosing who we work with, or just spend time chatting to, the information we possess passes directly between some-but-not-all people. Despite the ethical and theoretical advantages of egalitarian trust ([Zollman 2015](#)), people are demographically selective with their trust. In particular, as has been observed in workplace organisations (e.g., [Deo 2019](#)), the dominant tend to down-weight or ignore the testimony of the marginalised and so diverge in belief from them. And in fact some of Du Bois's sociological work was explicitly concerned with why it is that information does not easily transfer from black to white populations of the same town, why knowledge will not cross the colour line ([Du Bois 1904/2013](#)).

This can happen because background ideologies make the perspective of the marginalised seem highly antecedently implausible to the dominant (e.g., [Mills 2007](#); [Tilton 2022](#)). Or because people are more uncertain and reticent about how trustworthy is the testimony of those who they strongly disagree with, which per the above polarisation argument is likely to split the marginalised and dominant ([O'Connor and Weatherall 2018](#)). Or because in scenarios wherein learning about one's privilege might incentivise risky behaviour, the dominant do well to simply ignore testimony or evidence concerning the situation of the marginalised ([Kinney and Bright forthcoming](#)). Or, perhaps anticipating such reactions, the marginalised simply choose not to share pertinent evidence with the dominant ([Dotson 2011](#)). And whether or how much one bothers to inquire into something before forming an opinion depends on incentive to care ([Heesen 2015](#)).

However it comes about, we end up with another kind of information asymmetry, and one Du Bois was well aware of. He famously analogised the result of all such mechanisms as akin to there being a veil which separates the black from white world, where somehow we could see out but whites could not or would not reciprocate our gaze ([1903/1994](#), ch. 1). With equal poetry King described Du Bois's view as maintaining that all around is "a poisonous fog of lies" ([King 1968](#), 1) obscuring what white America could see of black America and infecting their ability to sensibly reason about what little they did ascertain. Due to the veil, the poison fog, the marginalised will hear and learn about each other's experiences while the dominant are less likely to have updated on this information source.

With this in hand Wu (forthcoming) has a relevant model. Consider the marginalised and dominant as each through their experiences “investigating” the question through various means their workplace environment (e.g., some make no special effort and go by their personal experiences, others look into reports of previous instances of workplace harassment, etc.). Note this does not have to be conscious investigation, although we assume they would prefer to be correct and are willing to change approach if they think they may learn better another way. Then with one sided testimonial dismissal the marginalised subgroup will reach the truth with greater frequency than the group as a whole. This is related to where Dietrich and Spiekermann (2022) found that “deliberation reduces majority competence.” These are cases where deliberation exacerbates the oversharing of biased evidence. By mainly listening to their own sources the mutual testimony of the dominant might make both their perspective, and the perspective of the total group they participate in, less reliable. The standpoint of the marginalised thus emerges overall favourite.

Note that for Wu’s model to apply we are leaning heavily on our modified CJT. For a classic CJT, Wu’s model, which incorporates extensive communication networks, would badly violate the independence assumption. But our modified CJT only punishes direct causal influence of one vote upon another and permits deliberation (Dietrich and Spiekermann 2013, §5). Again, no actual votes need take place. The standpoint of the marginalised is constructed by the result of a hypothetical election. The hypothetical election can be modelled to ensure there is no causal cross contamination among the votes of the marginalised.

The role of these last two subsections in my argument is worth emphasising for the sake of better understanding the relationship between the Condorcet results and standpoint epistemology. The intuitive read of Condorcet style results is that they are telling you more is better, whereas standpoint epistemology by its nature tells you to focus on a subset of a total population. I take what these sections show is that when we place the Condorcet results against a slightly broader perspective which includes just a little bit more of what we know of social structure, this apparent contradiction dissipates. When we know enough about broad social structure to know who is communicating with who, and who is liable to experience what—certainly among the things some knowledge of systematic oppression allows to gleam—then suddenly even Condorcet reasoning would advise one to be more discerning in whom one pools from. And when analysed it seems the advice that would output from this substantially aligns with what a standpoint epistemology would advise. The Duboisian leader is, in part, someone who appreciates this alignment and seeks out the pertinent group’s information so as to champion the perspective arising from it.

5. LEADERSHIP AS CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING

To take stock, Du Bois’s naive view of a standpoint vindicates core theses feminists have been concerned with. The Duboisian leader in seeking out the standpoint of the marginalised they are to promote can thus be confident that they are making a wise move. And it does this without proving too much. For, outside perhaps of the Pope under very special circumstances, no person or group is infallible. So it is well and proper that these arguments get us only that the inquirer sometimes does better to adopt the standpoint of the marginalised.

To be clear, it achieves this vindication at the level of the group. Except in so far as they made the effort to come to learn the position of the pertinent group and undertook to articulate and defend it themselves (the proper task of a Duboisian leader) there is no reason to take these arguments to vindicate the reliability of any particular marginalised person. If one views standpoint epistemology as committed to the claim that particular marginalised people are themselves the relevant source of authority this will thus seem no real vindication at all.

Now, there is no reason to fight over labels. If someone prefers to reserve the term “standpoint epistemology” for the claim about individuals then so be it. I still think that the group-level claim is of both theoretical and practical interest, given how it might guide someone trying to fulfil something like the role of the Duboisian leader. However, there is a deeper reason than the mere label to fear that the group-individual split undermines a key element of standpoint epistemology. And that is if one thinks the achievement thesis is an important part of the claim. For as traditionally understood, the achievement thesis precisely involves an individual coming to achieve the perspective appropriate to the group. It apparently requires an individual playing a key role to even be coherent.

To my mind it is a great good indeed that the view I have outlined does without the achievement thesis. As typically understood this thesis can end up rather seeming like to achieve a standpoint is to come to agree with what people with humanities Ph.Ds already think. One thus can't help but worry that such theses always risk theorists ventriloquising for the marginalised. We become Du Bois's car-window sociologists, except rarely bothering to even make the drive. The apparent appeal to mass experience is simply aesthetic, window dressing for claims already decided upon in the seminar room. Whereas the Duboisian leaders takes seriously the thought that the pooled experience of the masses contain wisdom sufficient to guide and lead (James 1956). Not always, but often enough that seeking them out and championing them as they actually are, rather than a cleaned-up version deemed appropriate by their intellectual betters, can be well worth the effort.

But one might worry that this is not enough. For instance, consider this in context of the debate for (e.g., Pearlman and Williams 2022) or against (e.g., Táiwò 2020) a policy of deferring to the marginalised. We have assumed that as individuals they/we are of varying reliability, and even as a group it's only sometimes a good bet to defer to their/our perspective. Will not deference defenders have a justifiable complaint that this version of standpoint epistemology is too weak, it begs the question against them?

The case for worrying can be strengthened. For there are cases concerning social oppression where our assumptions may not hold. Capitalist workplaces are hierarchical fiefdoms often rendered deliberately opaque to workers (Vredenburg 2022) and ideological delusions may render accurate belief formation incredibly difficult (Wills 2021). Conditions may sometimes be so opaque that even our CJT's minimalistic competence assumptions are too optimistic. Surely it is a worry that we have a version of standpoint epistemology that does not even uniformly favour the perspective of the marginalised in situations of oppression.

I do not think so. For a situation where our modified CJT theorem does not apply is not truth-conducive. What this means is that a best responder—someone with the entire group's pooled evidence, as the Duboisian leader aspires—is unlikely to get the right answer. Of course in such cases one ought not defer! What is more, this dramatically illustrates the problem with the achievement thesis: if achieving a standpoint is something over and above being as reliable as the best responder in that situation, it must involve having evidence or information unavailable to the group. It necessarily severs the connection between what the person occupying the standpoint knows and what the group's actual experience puts one in a position to know.

And this lets us show how, without having to resort to traditional achievement theses, we can still make room for leadership. We do this in two steps. First, as already noted the weaker independence assumption underlying our CJT ensures deliberation is permissible. But in fact we go further, encouraging deliberation as pooling independent sources of information. The good of consciousness raising is incidentally thus accounted for, since by making individual “voters” more reliable one improves prospects for attaining a deference-worthy standpoint. We can agree with black feminists in celebrating differences since through them we learn and grow together (Lorde 1979/2003). So while we acknowledge one may encounter scenarios wherein one ought not adopt the marginalised standpoint for us this is just a reminder that activism sometimes

requires education (Du Bois 1920/1999, 81) and pooling the lessons thereof (Goodin and Spiekermann 2015).

Now the canny philosophical reader (or at least a well-trained student who knows what phrases to look out for when working out where to mount objections) will note I qualified the above claim as resorting to “traditional achievement theses.” Because while it is true that I no longer require the group-perspective to embody any particular determined-a-priori commitments or anything of the sort, still it seems there is an achievement thesis of sorts being endorsed. An anonymous reviewer pointed out to me that what has happened is I have shifted the required achievement to being that of the Duboisian leader in coming to understand the amalgamated view through participation in discussion groups, structured conversations, etc. And at the group level likewise the group must now, through such consciousness raising activities, elevate itself to a status where its perspective is deference worthy. And both of these points are quite true! So do we now reach the traditional Austinian point in any philosophy essay, “the bit when we bog down, the bit where we take it all back” (Austin 2013)? Well, I hope not quite so dramatically. But none the less I must concede that there is a reasonable sense in which I am still calling for some sort of achievement thesis—the difference I wish to emphasise though is that there is no particular proposition the group or leader must endorse to have attained this perspective. I hope this suffices to avoid my earlier worries about elitism.

Second, consider a putative Duboisian leader as just one who has made an attempt to ascertain the group standpoint and consider the best case for it. They have essentially tried to make themselves akin to a best-response from the theorem. By examining their own circumstances they can thus make a reasonable judgement regarding whether the situation is truth-conducive. Duboisian leadership is thus displayed through either making the best case for the group perspective in cases where it is truth apt, or where the situation is more dire in leading efforts to raise consciousness and education.

As a sidebar here, it is this point which differentiates my argument from the often-similar perspective put forward by Gooding-Williams. I was very much inspired by Gooding-Williams in this account of Duboisian leadership. But the Duboisian leader per Gooding-Williams is far more interventionist than I envision the Duboisian leader. I take Du Bois’s leader to be trying to represent a view they may not themselves share—the “modal view” of a 7th warder is an intelligent representation of what one might take from amalgamating all the perspectives offered, but it need not be a view one found convincing. Nonetheless, on the Condorcet-ish grounds described in this essay, if you think you are in a truth-conducive situation you have some reason to sublimate your view to that of the modal view and do your best to champion it rather than your own view. It is only when one judges that one is not in a truth-conducive situation that before one champions the group view one intervenes to try and change its content by organising things like discussion groups, consciousness raising, etc. Whereas Gooding-Williams (I think because far better grounded in Du Bois’s own writings and thus sticking closer to his real view) would present the Duboisian leader as tending to have a particular view of modernity and what it required of a successful group therein, and thus would always be actively guiding their wards towards whatever perspectives are helpful for that endeavour.

As yet the case for naive standpoint epistemology has only been made in the simple binary scenario of our paradigm case. People will rightly expect more of standpoint epistemology. Luckily the bases for extending to more complex scenarios already exist in the social-choice literature. For instance, consider estimating a quantity that might be relevant for questions like: what proportion of men in this group are harassers? It seems in the spirit of this proposal to say that in such cases linear pooling would be preferred (Pettigrew 2020). Another class of examples would concern more logically and socially complex questions such as the marginalised reliably identifying bigotry as the cause of certain patterns of negative experience. These cases can

be addressed in a similar fashion (Bradley et al. 2014). And since standpoint epistemology is ultimately supposed to be useful in service of changing the world, it will be key to explore how this view of standpoints can guide action—e.g., via Seidenfeld et al. (1989). So while I acknowledge there is still work for a full defence of Duboisian leadership, I am cautiously optimistic the simple-minded approach advocated here will be borne out.

6. CONCLUSION

The naive Duboisian standpoint is just what most of the group believes on the question at hand. Du Bois seems to have thought leaders championing such a perspective was important and worthwhile. By noting various information asymmetries that exist between oppressed and marginalised, just the sort of information asymmetries that Du Bois studied in fact, we were able to generate from this a Condorcet-style argument for the standpoint's trustworthiness. This vindicates his leadership claims, and mirrors the fact that Du Bois himself was fond of Condorcet-style arguments for democracy and used voting aggregation procedures for epistemic purposes in his research. By insisting on the group standpoint as just what members of the group would say about a matter if asked when they can answer honestly, we retain Du Bois's egalitarian insistence on taking everyone seriously as a source of wisdom that good government should use. But we also saw a potential role for leadership in ascertaining and putting forward an intelligent version of this standpoint where conditions are ripe for it to be truth apt, and by encouraging consciousness raising and educative missions where it is not. In this way Du Bois's perspicuous percentage, however great a proportion of us they may be, have found a role reconcilable with egalitarian democratic convictions.

For Du Bois, eventually, social epistemological considerations led to socialism (Basevich 2020a). His classic defence of epistemic democracy ends with an argument for worker control of the means of production (Du Bois 1920/1999). And he said this in discussing socialised medicine:

The experiences of the mass of men form a reservoir which is at the disposal of the state, if we know how to use it. The democratic method, through discussion and universal suffrage taps that reservoir, it ascertains through the experience of all what the needs of each are; and then proceeds with the best methods known, to secure for the State, the services of people who are going to put that knowledge into practice. (Du Bois 1950/1985, 270)

Once again we see here the interplay of democracy and elite leadership. Those who occupy positions of office are just those who best embody the wisdom and technical skill the democracy has found itself to need, through pooling its information. In fact it seems the whole socialist society eventually became for him the romantic elite—collectively embodying the wisdom of the group, now the whole of society rather than any subunit, and putting forward the best case for that perspective by actually enacting it through the most efficient means. This is, needless to say, quite the extension from the humble situation of inquiry the naive standpoint epistemology defended here was meant to best model. But it is still noteworthy that Du Bois “was a genius and chose to be a communist” (King 1968, 9) with such reflections before him. In future work let us see for ourselves “by experiment and reason and not by dogma” (Du Bois 1958/1985, 298) whether argument could lead us from where he began to where he ended up.

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