

## HUME'S RACISM AND HIS THEORY OF PREJUDICE

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David Hume's *prima facie* racial claims in *Of National Characters* (henceforth *ONC*) have been interpreted as involving racial prejudices. Here is the footnote:

I am apt to suspect the Negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites. There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufacturers amongst them, no arts, no sciences. On the other hand, the most rude and barbarous of the whites, such as the ancient GERMANS, the present TARTARS, have still something eminent about them, in their valour, form of government, or some other particular. Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men. Not to mention our colonies, there are NEGROE slaves dispersed all over EUROPE, of which none ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity, tho' low people, without education, will start up amongst us, and distinguish themselves in every profession. In JAMAICA, indeed, they talk of one negroe as a man of parts and learning; but 'tis likely he is admired for very slender accomplishments, like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly.<sup>1</sup>

Was Hume racially prejudiced given his own theory of prejudice and what he says in this text? Suppose Hume encountered Negro slaves in his travels, and was not familiar with any evidence of their intellectual achievement.<sup>2</sup> Suppose, Negro intellectual achievement did not become evident until the 1780's, four years after Hume died. If Hume believed that Negroes were intellectually inferior to whites based on his experience, would his belief be justified at the time?

The discussion is divided into three parts. First, I focus on Robert Palter's and Aaron Garret's highly qualified arguments in defense of Hume and think through the plausibility of their arguments. Second, in order to sort through the debate, I unpack Hume's theory of prejudice. Third, I make concluding remarks. I argue that Hume's claims in the cited text meet the conditions he sets on prejudice, and that this in turn reveals he was racially prejudiced, as a popular essayist.<sup>3</sup>

### I. The Debate over Hume's Racial Prejudice

The first argument in defense of Hume shows that Hume's racial beliefs about the intellectual inferiority of Negroes were justified because of the historical circumstances Hume was in at the time. For instance, Palter offers a highly qualified defense of Hume by putting forth an argument that goes as follows: Beattie, in response to Hume's *ONC* remarks, provides evidence of the intellectual achievements of non-white groups such as the Aztecs and Incas. Beattie offers no evidence of Negro intellectual achievement. "Hume must have taken for granted the absence of any convincing historical—especially written, documentary—evidence" (Palter 7). Therefore, even if Hume's revised footnote was a thought-out response to Beattie, Beattie's objections did not speak directly to Hume's claim about Negroes. There was no evidence of Negro intellectual achievement.

There were many slaves. There was a high amount of white intellectual achievement. Thus for Palter, while Hume should have recognized that his belief that Negroes were intellectually inferior to whites was an extremely weak induction, the fact remains, that at that time, Hume was justified in believing that Negroes are intellectually inferior to Whites.

As a response to this first argument Popkin shows that Hume's racial belief was unjustified because of the evidence that was available. As Popkin states, "In the Renaissance participation by Africans in European affairs was not rare. . . . There had been a Black commander in Cortez's army in Mexico. A Black led Coronado's expedition across the American southwest, and . . . African intellectuals helped European scholars like Guillaume Postel to master Near Eastern languages. . . . The Ethiopian, Tasfa Seyyon, translated the Bible into Ethiopian around 1530" (67). "The Black Jew, David Reubeni, who wanted to join forces with the Pope ended up preaching in the Vatican. . . . Thus in the sixteenth century, a black playing a role co-equal to a European in European culture, was a known phenomenon, and did not create amazement" (68). So for Popkin, from the fact that Hume ignored the historical evidence to the contrary and the fact that ". . . he knew his views were being taken as authoritative by the color racists and the defenders of slavery shows he was not innocent, just dropping a casual prejudiced remark amongst the gentlemen after dinner" (75).

Popkin's historical points show that Hume's belief about Negro intelligence is unjustified. Yet it remains unclear why Hume believed that the difference in intellectual accomplishment between Negroes and whites is due to a difference in their nature. The racial generalization Hume offers in the ONC footnote has two parts: (a) Negroes are less intellectually accomplished than whites and (b) the differences in intellectual accomplishment between them are due to a difference in their nature (in contrast to a difference in experience). If Hume believed both (a) and (b), then there are two issues: whether his belief that (a) counts as racial prejudice and whether his belief that (b) counts as racial prejudice. Furthermore while Popkin's historical evidence is informative and shows (a) to be unjustified there is a difference between there being historical evidence at the time of Hume's writing opposing his racial generalizations and there being good reasons to believe that Hume was familiar with evidence opposing the generalizations. Does Hume have to be aware of evidence contrary to his racial beliefs in order for his beliefs to count as racial prejudices? It is not clear. Could Hume have been aware of this counter-evidence? Yes. Should Hume have been aware of it? Yes. Was Hume aware that at the time he made the remarks in ONC there was evidence against his racial generalizations? It is not clear.

The second argument in defense of Hume attempts to show that he was not racially prejudiced against Negroes because his beliefs about Negroes were open to revision. As Palter notes, Hume later revised his old footnote by substituting the phrase "scarcely ever" for "never." Thus when Hume says in the footnote, "There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation," we can take this textual evidence as showing that "Hume had come to allow that Negroes might in fact have already created civilized nations" (Palter 5). Hume believed that it was possible for Negroes to have the property of being civil or intelligent

according to Palter. If this is so, then some of the sting is taken out of Hume's belief that (b) Negro's lack of intelligence is due to nature. Negroes are not in an irremediable condition. They can change. If this is so then (b) is not a clear case of racial prejudice for Palter.

A response to this second argument shows that Hume's belief in (b) was not open to revision because he explained away counter evidence in the ONC footnote. The Jamaican intellectual referred to in the footnote has been identified by Henry Louis Gates Jr. as Francis Williams, a graduate from Cambridge University who taught Latin and Mathematics and published Latin poetry. Hume in the footnote describes the Jamaican as a parrot that is not really intelligent. So if Hume believed that it was possible that Negroes could be intelligent, then he would not have explained away the counter-evidence. But Hume did. Hume's belief that (b) the difference in Negro intellectual accomplishments was due to nature meant it was not possible for Negroes to be intelligent.

The third argument in defense of Hume attempts to show that Hume did not hold racial prejudices against Negroes in the ONC footnote because Hume's statement about the Jamaican was not serious but ironic. Palter states that Hume was being "gratuitously insulting" (Palter 7). If Hume was being ironic, presumably this would block Hume's having to make explanatory moves that appealed to his own theory of human nature. If Hume was ironic, he would not have explained away the evidence to the contrary, in the sense of defending his claim with explanations that appealed to his own theory. Thus Palter's interpretation of the ONC footnote as ironic supports the view that Hume's beliefs about the natural intellectual inferiority of Negroes were open to revision. Hume is not ignoring the evidence to the contrary since Hume would be approaching the counter-evidence ironically in an open fashion, recognizing that his beliefs could be falsified. Hume did believe that it was possible for Negroes to have the property of being civil or intelligent. Hence, Hume would not be racially prejudiced in virtue of that.

As a response to this third argument it bears noting that even if Hume's ironic and casual off-hand remarks with respect to the Jamaican case showed that Hume did believe that it was possible for Negroes to have the property of being civil or intelligent, the following question lingers: why did Hume explain his limited historical evidence in terms of "nature" making an "... original distinction betwixt these breeds of men . . ." as opposed to oppressive regimes, socio-economic factors or other moral causes?

As a way of addressing this question Palter offers a fourth argument in Hume's defense that goes as follows: Hume wanted to distinguish his view from the climatic determinism of Montesquieu. This claim is supported by Chamley and indirectly by Garrett.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, Hume's revision was not a thought-out response to Beattie but a thought-out response to Montesquieu. Palter's argument that Hume's footnote was a response to Montesquieu is relevant because it lends support to the view that Hume was open to revise his racial beliefs. Presumably, Hume wanted to distinguish his theory of moral causes—poverty, education, family background—from Montesquieu's stricter climatic determinism. The footnote was a response to Montesquieu. This shows that the intelligence of blacks would not be an irremediable condition for Hume. Hume could

explain the Jamaican case and other instances of black intellectual achievement by appealing to his notion of moral causes. The sense of possibility would thus be understood as “possible in our experience.” So Hume believed that it is possible in our world that Negroes possess the property of civility or intelligence. So it is not clear Hume was racially prejudiced against Negroes according to Palter.

In order to get clearer on the debate let’s consider an aspect of Hume’s system that has been given insufficient attention in the debate, namely, Hume’s own theory of prejudice. By unpacking his theory of prejudice we can possibly be in a position to determine whether Hume held racial prejudices, independently of the reasons underlying Hume’s explanation that “nature” made an “original distinction between breeds of men.”

## II. Prejudice: A Fourth Unphilosophical Species of Probability

Hume states the following with respect to prejudice:

A fourth unphilosophical species of probability is that derived from *general rules*, which we rashly form to ourselves, and which are the source of what we properly call PREJUDICE. An Irishman cannot have wit, and a Frenchman cannot have solidity (146).

This passage contains two examples of ethnic prejudices:<sup>5</sup>

1. An Irishman cannot have wit
2. A Frenchman cannot have solidity

Following Jack Lyons and Louis Loeb, I call the examples in (1) and (2) “first-order general rules.” First-order general rules are “. . . belief-like states with the content of statistical or universal generalization” (Lyons 272). “These generalizations are extrapolations from observed conjunctions between the members of resembling pairs of objects and are sometimes falsified by subsequent observation” (Loeb 108). Following Lyons and Loeb, first-order general rules will also be called “first-order general beliefs.” First-order general rules are contrasted with second-order general rules. Second-order general rules are “. . . extrapolations from the observed success of classes of first-order generalizations in avoiding falsification” (Lyons 108). Following Lyons and Loeb, second-order general rules will also be named “second-order general beliefs.” The following is an example of a second-order general rule:

- (1\*) Universal generalizations relating resemblances in ethnicity to resemblances in intellectual characteristics are false. (Loeb 118)

As Lyons notes, some general rules are good and some general rules are bad.<sup>6</sup> A good general rule, such as “every cause is prior to its effect,” is extensive and constant. The other seven rules by which to judge of cause and effect which Hume discusses are also examples of good second-order general rules (Hume 173). A general rule, according to Lyons, is extensive insofar as it is supported by a high number of conjunctions in experience, and a general rule is constant in that it has a low number of contraries in experience. Thus a good general rule meets both the extensiveness and constancy conditions. General rules, on the other hand, according to Hume are bad when they are

...changeable, weak, and irregular . . . The latter . . . are observ'd only to take place in weak minds, and being opposite to the other principles of custom and reasoning, may easily be subverted by a due contrast and opposition. *For this reason* the former are received by philosophy, and the latter rejected. (225, emphasis added)

Hume's use of "changeable," "weak," and "irregular" suggests that bad general rules are inextensive and irregular. A general rule is inextensive if it is based on a low number of conjunctions in experience, and a general rule is irregular if it has a high number of contrarieties in experience. That a belief is a bad general rule is not sufficient for it being a prejudice. As Hume says, "should it be demanded why men form general rules and allow them to influence their judgment, *even contrary to present observation and experience* [my italics], I should reply that in my opinion it proceeds from those very principles, on which all judgments concerning cause and effects depend" (Hume 147). This text indicates that holding a bad general rule is necessary but not sufficient for something to be a prejudice. A dogmatic condition is required in addition; this condition involves holding a bad general rule in the face of evidence to the contrary. Accordingly, here are what I take to be the necessary and sufficient conditions on prejudice:

- (INC) *The Inextensiveness Condition*: prejudices are those general rules held on the basis of a small number of experiences.
- (IRC) *The Irregularity Condition*: prejudices are those general rules for which experience has provided many apparent exceptions.
- (DGC) *The Dogmatic Condition*: prejudices are those general rules held in the face of evidence to the contrary.

Now let us consider the arguments in defense of Hume in light of this theory. Popkin's historical arguments show that Hume's beliefs that (a) Negroes are less intellectually accomplished than whites and (b) the differences in intellectual accomplishment between them is due to a difference in their nature (in contrast to a difference in experience) were not justified at that time. Thus the INC and IRC conditions are satisfied. The ironic interpretation of Hume's footnote is not convincing because even if it is true that Hume was responding to Montesquieu and Hume *could* have used his view of moral causes to explain why it is possible for Negroes to have intelligence, the fact is when he made his ONC remarks for some reason he did not. Hume did explain away evidence to the contrary when dealing with the Jamaican and thereby satisfied the DGC condition. Thus Hume was racially prejudiced against Negroes when he made his ONC remarks.

### III: Conclusion

In sum, what I have tried to show is that Hume provides an elegant set of logical tools that help determine when a person holds racial prejudices, independently of a person's consciousness of the historical evidence available at a given time. Determining whether or not there was evidence of Negro intellectual achievement that Hume was conscious of is not the ultimate arbiter that determines the truth of whether Hume held racial prejudices against Negroes when using Hume's logical tools. This is partly why the theological machinery of Hume's theory of prejudice is philosophically important. It also

helps us see Hume as a philosopher as opposed to a popular essayist. Despite the theoretical usefulness that Hume's theory of prejudice might have in shedding light on contemporary theories of racism, sexism, ethnocentrism and nationalism, I have used Hume's logical tools to make sense of his own remarks in *ONC* and have shown that based on his own theory, Hume, as a popular essayist, would be accurately described as having racial prejudices. It bears noting that I have focused on one footnote, which, even when revised, does not take us to a full appreciation of Hume's thinking on national characters or on the particular evils of racism. For example, *The History of England* comes fifteen to twenty years later, and Hume refines his handling of national characters at particular times. Also Hume's post-*Treatise* writings such as "Of the Standard of Taste" suggest a way of freeing ourselves from prejudice by discussing the principle of humanity, the standards of moral and aesthetic taste, and enlarging the sphere of our moral perceptions. While I have reservations about Hume's race blind remedy for ending racism, I do not defend this here due to space. And finally, in view of Winthrop Jordan's work in *White Man's Burden*, wherein it was English difficulties in enslaving Scots and Irishmen that led England to turn to the west coast of Africa for slaves, Hume probably knew of English arguments justifying enslaving Scots. How would that evidence play here? These considerations are not the material for this piece, focused as it is, but something along these lines would indicate that the footnote under the lens, here, is not Hume's full and final thinking on these issues.

## NOTES

1. This is the corrected version of a footnote that Hume later revised. This version of the footnote can be found in Miller.

2. This claim is based on Robert Palter's historical points about the lack of Negro intellectual achievement during Hume's time. His historical points are in his work, "Hume and Prejudice," 3-23. Henry Louis Gates Jr. has shown that there were a number of educated and talented blacks who moved in circles known to Hume. See also Taliaferro and Hendrickson who note that some ten thousand black intellectuals were in London during Hume's tenure. See also Popkin 23-27.

3. I thank Spencer Wertz for reminding me of being sensitive to the four different roles Hume occupied: an ordinary man of the eighteenth century, a popular essayist, a historian, and a philosopher.

4. See Chamley. I say Aaron Garrett's argument indirectly supports Palter's because Garrett argues as follows: (A) The *ONC* footnote was in the first volume of Hume's revised work. (B) Hume requested in Letter 509 that the advertisement be prefixed to the second volume of his work. Therefore, (C) it is unlikely that Hume's revised footnote in *ONC* was a response to Beattie as Immerwahr claimed. Garrett does not claim that the footnote was a thought-out response to Montesquieu; he just leaves open some possible candidates without arguing for anyone in particular.

5. I call (1) and (2) ethnic prejudices because they involve the use of ethnic-group terms as opposed to racial-group terms or terms designating national groups. I do not consider the issue of whether these terms refer to anything or not. The points made do not hinge on this debate. Philosophers who have discussed the metaphysics of race, ethnicity, and nationality include but are not limited to the following: Anthony Appiah, "Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections," *Color Conscious* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). Jorge J.E. Gracia, *Hispanic/Latino Identity: A Philosophical Perspective* (Malden: Blackwell, 2000). Sally Haslanger, "Gender and Race: What are They? What Do We Want Them To Be?" *Nous* 34,1 (2000): 31-55. Susanna Nuccetelli, "Latinos, Hispanics, and Iberoamericans: Naming or Describing?" *Philosophical Forum* 32,2 (2001). Robert Bernasconi and Tommy Lott Ed. *The Idea of Race* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000). Charles W. Mills, *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998). Ronald Sundstrom, "Race as a Human Kind," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 28,1 (2002). See also Linda Alcoff's, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender and Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

6. The distinction between good general rules that are philosophical probabilities and bad general rules that are unphilosophical probabilities is made by Lyons. In his useful article, "General Rules and the

Justification of Probable Belief in Hume's Treatise," *Hume Studies*, 27.2 (2001): 247-277. Lyons focuses primarily on the restrictions of good general rules and much less on bad general rules. My goal in this paper is to develop a fuller account of bad general rules and see how this bears on Hume's alleged racial claims in *ONC*. By focusing on bad general rules, I will show that not all second-order general rules are good, as Thomas Hearn suggests in "General Rules in Hume's Treatise," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 8 (1970): 405-422. Marie Martin also suggests this in "The Rational Warrant for Hume's General Rules," *Journal for the History of Philosophy* 31, (1993): 245-257.

7. I would like to express my appreciation to Kenneth Barber, Jorge J. E. Gracia, Michael Root, and Spencer Wertz for their comments on earlier drafts. Any of their comments that I did not incorporate are solely my responsibility. I thank the participants of the 58<sup>th</sup> annual conference of the New Mexico-West Texas Philosophical Society for their questions and suggestions.

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