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## Hume's Revised Racism Revisited

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John Immerwahr's brief note "Hume's Revised Racism" is doubtless one of the most intriguing recent discussions of Hume and racism.<sup>1</sup> Immerwahr presents a thesis as to why Hume revised a footnote originally added to his essay "Of National Characters" (hereafter "ONC") in 1753. In this note I will examine and dispute Immerwahr's thesis, which I believe can be shown to be seriously flawed. It is important to do so, as Immerwahr's note has been quoted a number of times in books and articles on Hume, and his thesis has been taken as gospel without sufficient examination of the grounds for his claims.<sup>2</sup> As a consequence, Immerwahr's thesis is in danger of becoming a stubborn belief, even if not properly supportable.

The controversy about Hume's racism centers on one infamous footnote added to the essay "Of National Characters" in the 1753–1754 edition of *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*. Why should we care about one footnote? We should care because the footnote seems to go against the image of a philosopher we thought we knew, and whom we likely esteem. In addition, it is shockingly bigoted. It reads in its entirety:

I am apt to suspect the negroes, and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures 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 symptom 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>3</sup>

The footnote was not present in the 1748 edition of the *Essays, Moral and Political*, or *Three Essays, Moral and Political*, where ONC first saw light. In the 1768 edition there is one very minor alteration (from "tho' low people" to "though low people"). In the 1770 edition the footnote becomes an endnote, M,<sup>4</sup> and there are again a few minor changes (from "betwixt these breeds of men" to "between these breeds of men"; from "of which never discovered" to "of whom never discovered"; for "'tis likely he is admired," read "it is likely he is admired") and one interesting substantive change (for "admired for very slender accomplishments," read "admired for slender accomplishments"). The most important change from the 1753 version of the note is in the 1777 posthumous edition, which Hume had corrected before he died. Hume rewrote the first two lines of 1770M, to read in 1777M:

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.<sup>5</sup>

In "Hume's Revised Racism," Immerwahr argues that it is likely that Hume, after reading James Beattie's "Essay On Truth" and in light of his criticisms, revised the footnote in the 1777 edition of ONC. Immerwahr cites two pieces of evidence, a letter from Hume to Strahan to which he refers but does not quote, and Beattie's criticisms of Hume, which Hume may have read (although how much of it he read is, of course, questionable).

It may seem unlikely to many that Hume would amend an essay on the basis of anything written by Beattie, as he clearly despised him. The letter that Immerwahr cites offers little support for a change of mind. In fact, Immerwahr misrepresents the content of the letter when he uses it to support his claims that "the revisions appear to be in response to some of Beattie's criticisms" (HRR, 481) and "[t]here is strong evidence, however, that Hume rewrote the

text in response to criticisms advanced by James Beattie" (HRR, 483). The passage from the letter in which Hume refers to Beattie reads:

But we must not part, without my also saying something as an Author. I have not yet thrown up so much all Memory of that Character. There is a short Advertisement, which I wish I had prefix'd to the second Volume of the Essays and Treatises in the Last Edition. I send you a copy of it. Please to enquire at the Warehouse, if any considerable Number of that Edition remain on hands; and if there do, I beg the favour of you, that you woud throw off an equal Number of this Advertisement, and give out no more Copies without prefixing it to the second volume. It is a compleat Answer to Dr Reid and to that bigotted silly Fellow, Beattie.<sup>6</sup>

The pejorative manner in which Hume is describing Beattie is very clear, and the "silly" needs little explanation. As for "bigotted," it here means blindly intolerant. The reason why the sense of "bigotted" is so clear is that earlier in the letter, Hume refers to the Glasgow professor "Dr Trail," who was "a declar'd Enemy to all Heretics, Socinians, Arians, Anti-Trinitarians, Arminians, Erastians, Sabellians, Pelagians, Semipelagians: In short, of every Sect, whose name terminated in *ian*, except Presbyterian, to whom he had a declar'd and passionate Attachment." Under Trail's tutoring, students became "very zealously Bigots," and Hume hopes that the students of Trail's successor will have "Orthodoxy, without Bigotry." Thus bigotry is not orthodoxy as such, but a zealous and mindless attachment to a cause while equally zealously and mindlessly attacking all dissenters. This is how we ought to understand the term as applied to Beattie, as Hume's ascription of bigotry to Beattie comes two paragraphs later in the same letter. Hume is not incorrect in calling Beattie a bigot toward Hume, as the premise of the *Essay on Truth* was that Hume was an immoral atheist, and so all of his opinions ought to be attacked irrespective of the merits of their individual content.

As to Beattie's presence in the letter, two things are clear. First, Hume does not mention Beattie alone, but in tandem with the far more respectable Thomas Reid. This is important, as it would seem that a response to both Reid and Beattie would have little to do with racism, given that Reid never criticized Hume on this account (as far as I know). Despite the importance of Reid in the letter, Immerwahr never mentions him.

Second, and more importantly, there is not the slightest hint of the revised footnote in the letter. What Hume, again quite clearly, has in mind as a response to Reid and the "bigotted silly fellow" is the "short Advertisement . . . prefix'd to the second Volume of the Essays and Treatises in the Last Edition." The "Advertisement" reads, in its entirety:

Most of the principles and reasonings, contained in this volume, were published in a work in three volumes, called *A Treatise of Human Nature*: A work which the Author had projected before he left College, and which he wrote and published not long after. But not finding it successful, he was sensible of his error of going to the press too early, and he cast the whole anew in the following pieces, where some negligence in his former reasoning, and more in the expression, are he hopes, corrected. Yet several writers, who have honoured the Author's Philosophy with answers, have taken care to direct all their batteries against that juvenile work, which the Author never acknowledged, and have affected to triumph in any advantages, which, they imagined, they had obtained over it: A practice very contrary to all rules of candour and fair-dealing, and a strong instance of those polemical artifices, which a bigoted zeal thinks itself authorised to employ. Henceforth, the Author desires, that the following Pieces may alone be regarded as containing his philosophical sentiments and principles.

There is no sign in the "Advertisement" of the controversy concerning Hume's racism. As there are no racist remarks in the *Treatise*, and as Hume seems to think that he is responding to weaknesses of the *Treatise* with the new edition, it seems further unlikely that the changes he has in mind had anything to do with the footnote. But finally, and most convincingly, Hume asked specifically that the "Advertisement" be prefixed to the second volume of the *Essays*. *ONC* was in the first volume! The second volume included the *Enquiries*, the *Dissertation on the Passions*, and the *Natural History of Religion*, all of which are a far more likely response to Beattie's and Reid's criticisms of the *Treatise*.

Hence, Letter 509, the "Advertisement" to which it refers, and its place in the text lend no credence to Immerwahr's theory that Hume changed his mind on the basis of any remark of Beattie's.

Another serious and more philosophically interesting problem with Immerwahr's argument concerns the content of Beattie's criticism of Hume. As previously noted, *M* was added in the 1753 edition of the *Essays*, revised lightly in the 1770 edition, and then substantially altered for the posthumous 1777 edition. The alterations of the 1777 edition drop reference to any other "inferior" group than blacks.

Immerwahr characterizes this claim variously as showing that Hume had "dropped the polygenetic language," "weakened the scope of his claims; rather than insisting that there were 'never' any eminent civilizations or individuals, Hume only claimed that such things have 'scarcely ever' existed," and "changed the target of his attack; the revised argument is directed only at blacks, rather than against all non-whites" (HRR, 483).

Immerwahr's last claim is undoubtedly right, although one might more correctly say that he limited the target as opposed to changed it: blacks were also in the cross-hairs in 1753M. The second claim is also correct, although one might wonder what difference is made by changing "never" into "scarcely ever" ("the missing shade of brown"?). As to the first claim, although Immerwahr is right that Hume has dropped the species language, this does not prove that he was not a polygenist. A case in point is his cousin Kames, who certainly thought that there were different species of men, but didn't really think that any of them were totally inferior, except, perhaps, blacks.<sup>7</sup> If Hume read the *Sketches of the History of Man* in draft, and wished to alter the footnote to subscribe to Kames's polygenism, this is perhaps how he might have altered it.<sup>8</sup> Hume offers no theory of race other than M, so it is also quite possible that he had not thought matters through as to what form the distinction between blacks and other humans takes.

But, really, there are many things that could have brought Hume to change the footnote: Adam Smith's works, Robertson's yet unpublished research on the Americas and India, Voltaire on China (Hume's remarks about China, given 1753M, are particularly paradoxical), or even Monboddo on the orangutans. Hume despised none of these writers to the degree he did Beattie. And the one source that seems least likely is Beattie. First, as shown in the letter to Strahan, his regard for Beattie was not high. But more importantly, Beattie's shining intellectual moment, the one point where the "bigotted silly fellow" really got the goods on Hume, was his extended remark about blacks, quoted at some length by Popkin.<sup>9</sup> Immerwahr misrepresents Beattie when he claims "[a]lthough Beattie's arguments did refute Hume's assertion of the inferiority of non-whites, they did not speak as directly against Hume's negative judgment of blacks" (HRR, 484).

*In breve*, Beattie's argument against Hume's racist remarks about blacks in 1753M goes as follows. First, although it is true that Africans and Americans have produced no great science or culture, what does this prove? To civilize a nation takes a long time: "one might say of an infant, that he can never become a man." But secondly, notes Beattie, Hume is basing his observations on "Negroe slaves." In all the versions of M, Hume stated "there are Negroe slaves dispersed all over Europe, of whom none ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity; though low people, without education, will start up amongst us, and distinguish themselves in every profession." Beattie's response shows a sensitivity to the condition of the slave severely lacking in Hume:

That a negro-slave, who can neither read nor write, nor speak any European language, who is not permitted to do any thing but what his master commands, and who has not a single friend on the earth, but is universally considered and treated as if he were a species inferior to the human; —that such a creature should so distinguish himself

among Europeans, as to be talked of through the world as a man of genius, is surely no reasonable expectation. To suppose him of an inferior species, because he does not thus distinguish himself, is just as rational, as to suppose any private European of an inferior species, because he has not raised himself to the condition of royalty.<sup>10</sup>

Beattie provides other more or less convincing arguments, but this passage shows an awareness of slavery as a state, its psychological and cultural effects (as opposed to the parochialism of Hume's remark), all of which make the trajectory of a freed slave in Europe incomparable to a low-born European.

Beattie's various claims about non-European civilizations could be found in countless books; there is nothing original or interesting about them. Already in the early 1750s Buffon was arguing against the many authors who made claims for the greatness of Inca and Aztec civilization. This demonstrates that such claims were established enough to warrant debunking. But an argument on behalf of blacks of the sort quoted above was a rarity in the philosophical literature.<sup>11</sup> This makes it very unlikely that Hume's response to Beattie, if he read Beattie seriously, would be to change his claims about all non-whites other than blacks. If Hume had distanced himself from his remarks about blacks, Immerwahr's claim would be slightly more supportable. In fact, a more tenable theory might be that the alteration of "very slender" to "slender" in the 1770 edition was due to Beattie's remarks (but there is obviously no real evidence for this either, and it may be chronologically insupportable).

In conclusion, Beattie does not seem a likely source for Hume's change of mind between 1753M and 1777M.

## NOTES

1. John Immerwahr, "Hume's Revised Racism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 53.3 (1993): 481-486 (hereafter HRR).

2. For examples, see Christopher Berry, *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 81; Andrew Vincent, "Anthropology and Critical Philosophy," in *History of Philosophy Yearbook for the Australasian Society for the History of Philosophy* 2 (1992): 50 n. 46; Emmanuel Eze, ed. and intro., *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1997), 37. I have seen it referred to as a fact on the Internet, often attributed to Eze (who does not cite Immerwahr, but clearly derives the claim from him). Robert Palter criticizes Immerwahr at some length in "Hume and Prejudice," *Hume Studies* 21.1 (1995): 3-5. Palter also disputes Immerwahr's usage of "bigoted," as I do below. But Palter does not really question Immerwahr's argument for the influence of Beattie on Hume (as far as I can tell).

3. David Hume, *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects* (London, 1758), vol. 1, 125n. I have quoted the text from the 1758 edition, as that is the one I had access to for my collation. The note is identical to that found in the 1753 edition (as far as I know).
4. I will refer to Hume's racist footnote, in general, as "M." I will refer to particular editions of the note with the date of the edition, and then "M" (e.g., "1753M").
5. David Hume, *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects. In Two Volumes* (London and Edinburgh, 1777), vol. 1, 550. This discrepancy in editions was first noticed by Eugene F. Miller (David Hume, *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller [Indianapolis: LibertyClassics, 1987], 629–630). I am indebted to Miller's valuable work throughout (although I have done my own collation of M).
6. Letter 509, in *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932; repr. 1969, 1983), vol. 2, 301.
7. Lord Kames (Henry Home), *Sketches of the History of Man*, 6 vols. (Edinburgh, 1788), vol. 1, 20.
8. One must be very careful when discussing eighteenth-century polygenism (the term is not used in the eighteenth century, as far as I know). Although there were a number of "polygenists" in the eighteenth century, despite the dominance of "monogenist" explanations, many thought that all the varieties of humanity, although they were of different species, were of the same genus, and all human. This position was shared by such important polygenists as Georg Förster and Kames. Furthermore, some monogenist works (such as Cornelius De Pauw's *Recherches philosophiques*) were far more virulently "racist" than either Förster or Kames. It is best to dispense with the terms and treat racial thinkers on a case-to-case basis, as racial theory in the eighteenth century stood (or sat) at the intersection of many other concerns.
9. Richard Popkin, "Hume's Racism," in *The Philosophical Forum* 9.2–3 (1977–78): 219–221.
10. James Beattie, *Essays: On the Nature and Immutability of Truth, in Opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism. On Poetry and Music, as they affect the Mind. On Laughter, and Ludicrous Composition. On the Utility of Classical Learning* (Edinburgh, 1776), 312.
11. But see also Monboddo's equally interesting criticism of Hume's footnote in *Antient Metaphysics*. Lord Monboddo argued that Greek philosophy was derived from the ancient Egyptians and that the ancient Egyptians were an African nation possessed of as much genius as any Europeans Hume might care to name. Monboddo responded to the possible objection that sub-Saharan Africans have thicker features, stating "I hope the reader will not believe that the qualities of the mind depend on the features of the face, any more than upon the colour of the skin or the nature of the hair": Lord Monboddo (James Burnet), *Antient Metaphysics: Volume Third Containing the History and Philosophy of Men* (London, 1784), 185n. Shades of Martin Bernal.