IV

HUME'S RACISM RECONSIDERED

Professors Harry M. Bracken, David Fate Norton and myself, among others, have written on, and spoken about the racist views that appear in the writings of Locke and Hume.¹ We have been challenged by defenders of these heroes of empirical thought, who say that these indications of racist attitudes are not part of the philosophies of these thinkers, but are, at worst, just accidental or incidental expressions of prejudices which they shared with many of their times. Therefore, we are told that these expressions should not be given any philosophical significance, but should be considered in context. These views do not follow from the empirical epistemologies of either Locke or Hume.²

I have carefully stated that I do not think that the racism expressed in Hume's essay, "Of National Characters", follows from his theory of knowledge.³ In fact, as one of the matters I shall argue for in this paper, Hume's racist contention was disproven in his own day by empirical evidence that he must have known about. Hume never modified or altered his contention in the many subsequent editions


² Several people have raised these points to me personally. Prof. Katherine Squadrito has been writing on this, principally against Bracken's views, but also about my own. See her "Locke's View of Essence and its Relation to Racism: a Reply to Professor Bracken", The Locke Newsletter VI (1975), pp. 41-51.

of his essays that appeared in his life time, even when challenged by James Beattie, one of the critics who bothered him most.

In the essay, "Of National Characters", written in 1748, Hume was chiefly challenging Montesquieu's theory of the role of environment in causing the differences in national character. At one point in his argument he wrote the following footnote, placed in the 1753-54 edition:

"I am apt to suspect that the negroes and in general all of 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 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."

Hume was prejudiced about the Irish. So, he was also prejudiced about people of color. His alleged inductive evidence, some say, may have been the best available at the time, and it reinforced what he already believed. I have tried to show that he offered an extreme view for his time, claiming that there was an initial differentiation of people that was unchangeable, and that this explained the cultural and intellectual superiority of whites as compared to people of color. Hume's view was a non-theological form of polygenesis, making it a matter of nature rather than God, that some species of people have greater intellectual and cultural abilities than others. The previous form of

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4 See the introduction to Vol. III of Hume's The Philosophical Works (London, 1882) for the history of the essays.
6 See, for instance, his remarks in A Treatise of Human Nature (Oxford, 1978), Selby-Bigge edition, concerning the source of prejudice, Book I, sec. xiii, p. 146 ff. Hume used one of his anti-Irish comments as an example, and offered an explanation of how people can accept general rules that overrule their evidence. This might explain how Hume managed to ignore the counter-evidence to his own views about the inferiority of blacks.