

THE ESOTERIC WRITING OF DAVID HUME

by

Kendra Asher  
A Dissertation  
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Committee:

\_\_\_\_\_ Director

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Department Chairperson

\_\_\_\_\_ Program Director

\_\_\_\_\_ Dean, College of Humanities  
and Social Sciences

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Fairfax, VA

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A Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy at George Mason University

by

Kendra Asher  
Masters of Arts  
The American University in Cairo, 2010  
Bachelor of Arts  
University of Wisconsin—Madison, 2006

Director: Daniel B. Klein, Professor  
Department of Economics

Spring Semester 2021  
George Mason University  
Fairfax, VA

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## **DEDICATION**

This is dedicated to my husband, Jake, who is always the first to edit my work, my two children, Henry and Mirabelle, who are always the first to interrupt it, and my cat, Newton, who is always by my side.

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## **ABSTRACT**

### THE ESOTERIC WRITING OF DAVID HUME

Kendra Asher, Ph.D.

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Dissertation Director: Dr. Daniel B. Klein

This dissertation examines the works of David Hume and his use of esotericism in his historical and political writing. In the past couple of years there have been calls to rethink David Hume's legacy and even rename buildings named after him. It is perhaps fitting and necessary to reassess the accomplishments and legacies of historical figures as culture changes. As one of the great historians of the 18th century, Hume would undoubtedly agree. Yet it is also necessary not to rush to judgment and to understand any given sentence as part of larger performance—the entire essay or even body of work—and within their historical context. Many of Hume's popular writings encourage his reader to continually combat the natural urge to simplify historically or culturally distant concepts or people. Understanding the works of Hume, and others of his time, can sometimes be additionally complicated by the fact that some of it is written with esoteric meanings to subtly communicate an idea or sentiment. In the Appendix to this

dissertation I provide numerous quotations of Hume practicing, acknowledging, or endorsing esotericism.

Chapter one, “Moderation and the Liberal State: David Hume’s History of England,” examines Hume’s use of political esotericism to advance his two overarching goals. The primary goal was to disseminate the philosophy that political harmony depends on recognizing opposing points of view, and political authority should reside near the middle. The attitude does not require each to moderate his or her own views. In fact, on many subjects, Hume did not hold a view anywhere near the center; he merely promoted the notion that society should be governed temperately, with an understanding of the median viewpoint, and that requires entering into and giving due regard to opposing viewpoints. An amicable approach to politics (or what emerges in Adam Smith as “Solonic” politics) helps to avoid political extremism and instability. Hume’s secondary goal was to persuade toward the view he favored, a liberal state, a state that could be sustainable only if Hume’s primary goal was achieved. Here Hume is trying to move the median toward political liberalism by means that are liberal in the older senses of that term, as in “the liberal arts.”

Chapter two, “Interpretations of Hume’s Footnote on Race,” examines his infamous footnote, which Hume added to his essay, “Of National Characters,” a footnote that denigrates African civilizations and black people in general. The footnote creates a contradiction to readers acquainted with Hume. Hume is widely recognized as a critic of bigotry, yet his footnote is the height of bigotry. Furthermore, in 1752, the year prior to the addition of the footnote, he excoriated slavery. Modern scholars offer different

interpretations of the footnote. Most agree he was prejudiced against blacks, but the degree to which the footnote collides with the anti-bigotry perspective projected in his other writings is disputed. This chapter shows the many perplexing contradictions created by the footnote in Hume's writings and ponders whether the contradictions were intentional. I argue that Hume often wrote in an ambiguous and occasionally contradictory fashion to draw readers with opposing views into his work, yet his true beliefs were sometimes hard to discern. Conclusions over the extent of Hume's racism are not made; in fact, this chapter argues they should only be made with caution. A very likely answer is that Hume did hold racist views, but his numerous statements suggesting the contrary should not be ignored. Hume may have written the denigration to create stark contradiction and to lampoon racist attitudes necessary to justifying slavery. Alternatively, he may have been trying to persuade pro-slavery opponents into allow a hearing to those like himself who argued against slavery—trying to reason with his opponents without recrimination for rank inhumanity and injustice. The extent of Hume's racism might be hard to truly know, but this chapter argues that it is likely that the footnote was added and amended to improve the effectiveness of his arguments against slavery.

## **MODERATION AND THE LIBERAL STATE: DAVID HUME'S HISTORY OF ENGLAND**

In 1752, the year he commenced working on his series *The History of England* (hereafter referred to as his *History*), David Hume was in the later part of his career. He had matured considerably from the 28-year-old who published the work for which he is better known today, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, which he famously stated had been rushed to the presses too hastily. Hume's *History*, although not as widely studied today, would end up influencing not just his own culture but American culture as well throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; it was to become one of the most widely read texts of English history. As Thomas Jefferson, a strong critic of Hume, wrote, "Our laws, language, religion, politics, & manners are so deeply laid in English foundations, that we shall never cease to consider their history as a part of ours, and to study ours in that as its origin. Every one knows that judicious matter & charms of stile have rendered Hume's history the Manual of every student" (Jefferson, 1810).

A high-quality history should be written as more than a rote chronicle of significant events and leaders. Beyond simply summarizing the past, a rich historical account can influence society by providing lessons and inspiration on how to create a better future. Hume's *History* went further in this direction than other similar texts from his time. It can be seen as not only a philosophy book that explains human nature through a series of prominent past examples, but also as a political book meant to make us rethink

how we view those with opposing political views and to question how government violence should be used against one side or the other.

Many Hume scholars comment critically on Hume's shift in the focus of his writing from his earlier, "more serious" work to his later, more accessible and popular writings which included his *History*. Hume himself was well aware that his love of fame was cause for criticism. When summing up his life in his autobiography, he wrote, "Even my love of literary fame, my ruling passion, never soured my temper, notwithstanding my frequent disappointments" (Hume, 1985, p. xl). However, as this chapter will argue, chasing celebrity and writing in an approachable manner are not necessarily undignified goals. Rather, a celebrated popular status was a necessary component for Hume to gain enough respect to shift public opinion. Hume saw no value in confusing the average reader with overly complex writing. As M. A. Box (1990) points out, "It did not in Hume's view adulterate philosophy to render it approachable to men of *bons sens*; it adulterated philosophy to becloud it with occult qualities and incoherent jargon" (p. 52). For Hume, it was not enough to simply have an interesting and coherent philosophical theory, one had to effectively communicate that theory to the general public.

Hume's later writings were part of a growing movement among philosophers, as Melzer (2014) states, to write "for the purpose of enlightening and transforming the political and religious world" (p. 237). In his book, *Philosophy Between the Lines*, Melzer points out that around the time Hume was active, political esotericism, one of the four types of esotericism he outlines in his book, was starting to gain traction among philosophers. Political esotericism was a project by philosophers aimed at creating a

rational society. Melzer formally defines political esotericism as “philosophical dissimulation in the service of a political as distinguished from a philosophical or pedagogical project” (p. 238). The following pages will examine the political esotericism used in Hume’s *History*. By employing esotericism, Hume’s books served the purpose of steering the public away from versions of history that aided extremism and inflamed violent passions by not revealing more than was necessary to make his perspectives clear to the discerning reader.

Hume’s *History* was a document meant to draw in members of all sides and nudge them to accept a center-leaning compromise of the historical narrative, which sometimes required him to write diplomatically in a way that would appeal to all sides. If his readers could learn to make a mental compromise over subjective or uncertain lessons of the past, they may become practiced in doing so and adopt this negotiable approach to their understanding of contemporary political issues as well. I will argue that Hume’s goal was primarily to create a culture which accepted that governmental authority had to set rules around the median opinion, and with this expectation created in a culture, governments would be encouraged to follow a median stance as well. Although it was preferable for government to rule in the center, those with non-central views could be valuable in moving the median opinion along the scale, as long as they did not push an extreme agenda and try to force it on society. In fact, that was Hume’s secondary goal, to push the median belief of culture toward one that favored a liberal state.

Section 1 explains why Hume set these goals for his political esoteric project and how the two goals were fundamentally linked. Section 2 will look into why Hume

believed a written history was the best vehicle for this project. Section 3 will examine specific examples from Hume's *History* and discuss the reactions to the series. Finally, in Section 4 I will give my concluding remarks.

## **I. Hume's Goals of a Stable Liberal State**

Moderation, as a political and social aspiration, can be defined in two ways: by holding an opinion that is a compromise between two extremes, or by merely accepting that governance must operate near the middle to dissuade the more violent passions of extremists. For David Hume, a man who understood the importance of balance of power (in spite of his occasional far-off-center views), the second definition of moderation was the better one. In terms of political power, Hume was a believer in meeting halfway to give two arguing sides some of what they want rather than giving a total victory to any one side. When opposing sides walk away from an argument both feeling as though they have been given some degree of political victory, not only will they have had a positive negotiating experience, but when the two sides have to "play again," they will be more likely to temper their high passions and aim for a win-win rather than an absolute victory.

Andrew Sabl's book (2013), *Hume Politics: Coordination and Crisis in the History of England*, details how Hume's *History* can be seen as a series of coordination problems, with violent skirmishes arising over accepted authority. He rightly notes that one of Hume's great innovations in thought is his assertion that "conventions of authority need not rest on moral agreement. In fact, their great attraction is that they can arise in the absence of such agreement and persist, to the benefit of peace and good government" (p.

1). For Hume, the best place for conventions of authority is near the middle of public opinion, where they are most likely to maintain long-term stability. The process of setting government authority near the center requires nonpartisanship and continual adjustments and refinements of opinions. It requires a tamping down of the natural passions that lead to factionalization and a reducing of the impulse to simplify or distort distinct ideas or groups, whether the ideas or groups are of the past or present.

This process, however, does not require everyone to come to the same or similar conclusions in a society. As Donald T. Siebert (1990) points out, Hume held many morally unconventional views in his lifetime. “One thing is clear about Hume the moralist. Although he often supports conventional positions—one should love one’s family and help one’s fellow creatures—he also advocates the heterodox: pride is normally good, adultery is no real vice, suicide is occasionally advisable, religious worship is too frequently an abomination” (p. 180). If a society held a preference for governmental moderation that was grounded in the established system, unconventional thinkers like David Hume or even Jean-Jacques Rousseau could both still live contentedly within it. (Hume’s interaction with Rousseau is an apt example of theory not always matching practice, [Hume 2010]).<sup>1</sup> For this type of society to be sustained, the majority of its members would have to favor for a leader what Adam Smith calls a “Man of Public Spirit,” rather than a “Man of System,” even if the “Man of System” favors their preferred system (Smith et al., 1984, pp. 233-234).

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<sup>1</sup> Hume and Rousseau had initially formed an amicable relationship over scholarship, with Hume even assisting Rousseau in moving to England. However, the friendship eventually soured once Rousseau settled in England, and the two started interacting more consistently.

In his book, *Hume's Philosophical Politics*, Duncan Forbes (1975/2010) argues Hume wrote his history as a final phase in his plan “to give the established, Hanoverian, regime a proper intellectual foundation” (p. x). In doing so, Hume tried to diminish the power of many partisan myths that encouraged factionalization of political parties. Yet Hume’s work was an attempt to do much more than legitimize the current regime. In most of his popular work, especially his *History*, Hume tries to train and modify his reader to be open to one’s intellectual opponents and to learn from their point of view. He attempts to train the reader to understand that for many issues, politics and history are subjective and worth compromising over. Box (1990) notes on some of Hume’s writings, Hume “hoped to settle vain disputes by showing them to be undecidable, and thereby to turn man’s inquisitiveness into constructive channels” (p. 38).

For Hume, his goal of reinforcing a moderate, established government coincided with his desire for greater liberty. There could be no liberal state without an agreement among the populace that government had to be centered near the middle. Although there is some debate around Hume’s meaning in using the word “liberty” (Capaldi, 2018), in this chapter I assume Hume’s idea of a stable liberal state is one with liberty defined as not just the stable rule of law, but a presumption in favor of having one’s person, property, and promises due be left alone and undisturbed by the government and other people. Klein and Matson (forthcoming) termed this notion “mere-liberty”.

A healthy measure of liberty, in this sense, is much harder to achieve, and it cannot be achieved for long without a moderate government. There must be not only a strong, stable government that is discouraged from encroaching on its peoples’ property,

but also a strong consensus by the people to obey their government, along with an awareness of when it overreaches. If a culture lacks an appreciation for governmental moderation or if the government stops acting sufficiently moderately, the citizens' sense of duty to obey society's rules will weaken. Rebellious factions may decide to follow only the rules they support, especially if the government is brought too far to the opposing side. A culture built around following the rule of law but which is unable to coordinate obedience to its laws, likely will deteriorate and bring liberty down with it.

On another level, when factions reach the point where large circles of society do not follow the laws they dislike, the government tends to expand its powers to force obedience. This expansion leads to more violent emotions on both sides, and truth becomes a victim. Leaders tend to gain greater power in highly partisan societies as emotions run high, while citizens put more faith in and give more power to their leaders than their leaders may deserve, believing them to be capable of the extraordinary, and occasionally even the miraculous. Humanizing leaders on both sides can therefore become a tool to encourage moderation in highly partisan societies. Stable, liberal rules of law become less favored as citizens begin to prefer the quick solutions of arbitrary law that can defeat the opposing side.

In such situations, government expansion and encroachment on individual liberty become less troubling than a defeat of the other side, or than stopping the violence that comes from the turmoil of factionalization that begins to build up. In the end, Hume writes, violence often increases the call for tyranny as society hopes to re-establish security. As Hume (2015) states in Book VI, after the English Civil Wars when Cromwell

took control of the government, “By recent, as well as all ancient example, it was become evident, that illegal violence, with whatever pretences it may be covered, and whatever object it may pursue, must inevitably end at last in the arbitrary and despotic government of a single person” (VI, p.54). Turmoil and violence almost never strengthen cultural support for more liberty. Unrestrained strongmen with arbitrary power often are applauded as they encroach on stable rules of law and liberty because they can restrain the violent passions of the masses.

Although Hume called himself a “friend of liberty,” he was well aware that liberty tends to ferment polarization and factions, which, in the long run, can lead to the reduction of liberty. In a letter written in May 1761, he noted, “The spirit of faction, which prevails in this country, and which is a natural attendant on civil liberty, carries every thing to extremes on the one side, as well as on the other” (2011a, Vol 1, p. 344). In his essay, “That Politics May Be Reduced to a Science,” Hume (1985) states, “Those who either attack or defend a minister in such a government as ours, where the utmost liberty is allowed, always carry matters to an extreme, and exaggerate his merit or demerit with regard to the public. ... When this accusation and panegyric are received by the partizans of each party, no wonder they beget an extraordinary ferment on both sides, and fill the nation with violent animosities” (pp. 27-28). In order for liberty to be sustainable and not self-destructive, there had to be a cultural brake on this natural tendency toward polarization. By disseminating philosophy that encouraged the general public towards this type of thinking, one could indirectly encourage liberty and a stable state. Hume saw an impartial history that would encourage moderation as an antidote to

political factions. As will be discussed in the next section, there are many reasons why he saw history as a cure to the liberal problem of self-destruction.

## II. Why History?

Livingston (1985) argues Hume's historical work is partially a "fulfillment of a demand imposed by his conception of philosophy" (p. 2). Although the consistency in thought between Hume's earlier and later work may not be as strong as Livingston proposes, there is a clear thematic trend within Hume's writings, and his interest in history was likely propelled by his earlier philosophical work. Hume's desire to write a history can be traced to around 1739, when he published his *Treatise of Human Nature*. The desire continued to be on his mind throughout the years. In January 1747 he wrote to his brother, "Had I any Fortune, which cou'd give me a Prospect of Leizure & Opportunitys to prosecute my historical Projects, nothing cou'd be more useful to me" (2011b, p. 23).

In 1752, Hume was finally given the opportunity to focus more directly on his historical series when he was elected librarian to Edinburgh's Faculty of Advocates. In 1754, he published what is now known as Book V of *The History of England*—the first volume of the series to be written—which opened with the first Stuart King, James I, crowned in 1603. Within a decade, he had published all six volumes of his *History*, which spanned thousands of pages and covered hundreds of years, from the invasion of Julius Caesar to the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Why, despite his success in other genres of

writing, Hume felt the need to compile a history is a question worth exploring, as he did invest a significant amount of resources into the venture.

One impetus for him was a lack of what he considered impartial English histories of high quality. Historian Rapin de Thoyras, for instance, had once been a favorite of Hume's for what appeared to be a comparative lack of bias until Hume looked closer at his work and found significant errors of interpretation (Forbes, 1975/2010, pp. 262-263). In one letter, Hume lambasted the ignorance and partiality of all previous historians. He wrote in June 1753, "Rapin, whom I had an esteem for, is totally despicable" (2011a, Vol. 1, p. 179). In a letter written in January 1753, prior to the publication of his first *History*, Hume wrote, "You know that there is no post of honour in the English Parnassus more vacant than that of History. Style, judgement, impartiality, care—everything is wanting to our historians" (2011, Vol. 1, p. 170). Although there were surely many other comparably vacant fields that could have benefited from Hume's talent, and could potentially have aided him in his push for a liberal state, Hume saw history as uniquely important. This particular deficit bothered him because of the substantial benefits he believed individuals could gain in learning history and the great danger that could be created in a society when history was written poorly and with bias.

Hume believed an accurate history could play an important role in improving a reader's character and teaching perspective. In 1741, he published an essay titled "Of the Study of History," in which he explains why women particularly, but generally all people, should pursue the study of history, "as it amuses the fancy, as it improves the understanding, and as it strengthens virtue" (1985, p. 565). For Hume, a knowledge of

one's own country's history, as well as ancient Greek and Roman history, was essential to anyone who craved knowledge and desired to be considered good company and well-esteemed. It is important to note that Hume encouraged focusing study on the history of cultures not too distant to the individual's own. The further removed a history is from one's own culture, the more removed is its usefulness.

Hume did not believe in the uniformity of man, as some scholars like J. B. Black have proposed (1926). Rules and laws that worked in some society in the past would not necessarily work in a different society in the present. Lessons obtained from history cannot be *directly* applicable to any other time or place. As Forbes (1975/2010) points out in a chapter which critiques Black and other scholars' interpretation of Hume, Hume felt "in effect, that pride is pride . . . , but the pride and honour of an Athenian is a different sort of pride and honour to that of a Frenchman who satisfies it in the duel, dueling being unknown in ancient Greece" (p. 108). Nevertheless, this does not mean that history has no value. The passions and conflicts of the governed, passions that Hume sometimes thought needed to be calmed, often echo each other across nations, cultures, and time. History, especially that of a similar culture or period, can help one predict the outcomes of various political circumstances. Thus, cautions and morals that Hume derives from historical events in his *History*, from England's not too distant past, are likely meant to be applied during his own time. Hume saw that moderation in government could have prevented violence in England's recent past, but this does not mean it would have worked in ruder times. Good rules for governance needed to be customized and gradually adjusted with time. As Hume (2015) states in a footnote in

Book III of his *History*, “It must indeed be confessed, that such a state of the country required great discretionary power in the sovereign; nor will the same maxims of government suit such a rude people, that may be proper in a more advanced stage of society” (p. 469).

History could illustrate, in a less passionate and urgent manner than contemporary commentary, the instability resulting from factional bias becoming too strong. Hume was able to show in great detail the disconnect between those who believed in a faction’s cause and his willingness to see the truth from facts and experience. As John Vladimir Price (1965) notes, Hume commonly uses the disparity between the ideal views of a person and reality in his *History* to ironic, and usually condescending, effect, comparing what an actor wants to be true versus what is true (p. 6). Note Hume’s (2015) use of the word “chivalry” in Vol. II before telling the story of Edward III’s unjust treatment of the town of Calais (p. 237), and again after Henry, duke of Hereford, turns against his criminal associates (p. 313). Another example of Hume’s use of irony is the humorous story told in the last paragraph of Hume’s treatment of Henry VIII. On the surface it is about banal academic infighting, but it serves as a metaphor for the religious squabbles of the era (III, p. 331-2). Hume showed this to be a particular problem historically when some person or group is able to take advantage of those biases through political power. Even though Hume criticizes all questionable historical narratives, the narratives he targets most vehemently are the ones that support certain power structures, be they the Whigs, the Tories, the rightful power of a king, or the rightful power of Parliament.

Hume saw that not all distortions are created equal and not all are an equal threat to the liberal state.

Subscribing exclusively to a distorted, simplistic, and partisan narrative of the past can be dangerous when it leads the subscribers to support dramatic political actions to “restore” something that never existed in the first place, or to destroy something that was never a significant threat. These distortions can create reckless or misguided allegiances to groups or leaders, which can be dangerous in the long run and disrupt the fundamental power of government. Even though a historical text could be used to calm passions, as Hume tried to do, it could also be used to inflame or mislead them.

Hume thought history could shape one’s opinion of government, and that opinion plays a vital role in sustaining that government. In his essay “Of the First Principles of Government,” Hume (1985) writes, “We shall find, that, as FORCE is always on the side of the governed, the governors have nothing to support them but opinion. It is therefore, on opinion only that government is founded” (p. 32). Who has a right to rule is a matter of what consensus exists or can be built in public opinion; often that consensus is based on the antiquity or perceived antiquity of a particular claim to rule. Hume (1985) states, “Antiquity always begets the opinion of right” (p. 33). Therefore, a false understanding of history can foster a harmful level of allegiance or animosity to a government’s rule or a political ideal. Hume found that it was common for political groups to write a narrative of history that supported their claim to power. It was also common for some factions of the public to want to believe in these false or exaggerated narratives, presumably when it best fit their agenda.

In one essay, Hume explains how one valuable way to reduce partisan urges was to create a coalition of the political parties to help increase prosperity and encourage proper moderate opinions (1985, p. 494). First, one had to establish that truth and good actors operate on both sides of almost any issue. History could be one tool to help achieve a sense of larger coalition. In the case of historical disputes, Hume (1985) writes that a coalition would also serve in the best interests of a peaceable resolution. “We shall proceed to exercise the same moderation with regard to the historical disputes between the parties, by proving that each of them was justified by plausible topics; that there were on both sides wise men, who meant well to their country; and that the past animosity between the factions had no better foundation than narrow prejudice or interested passion” (p. 494). Further, Hume (1985) writes that a focus on moderation in history could have positive results in unifying present society:

But this is certain, that *the greater moderation we now employ in representing past events; the nearer shall we be to produce a full coalition of the parties*, and an entire acquiescence in our present establishment. Moderation is of advantage to every establishment; Nothing but zeal can overturn a settled power: And an over-active zeal in friends is apt to beget a like spirit in antagonists. The transition from a moderate opposition against an establishment, to an entire acquiescence in it, is easy and insensible (p. 500, emphasis added).

Reading this, it is clear that Hume’s intention in writing his *History* was likely not merely to make it truthful, but to help shape opinion and therefore government, turning it into a sustainable liberal state.

### III. Hume's History

As Forbes (1975/2010) pointed out, it is difficult for anyone to say with complete confidence that he or she has pinpointed Hume's views on any matter:

Hume is terrible campaign country, rugged, broken, cross-grained, complex, remorseless in its demands. One has to fight every inch of the way, and can never feel really secure. No interpretation ever seems to get going before it is pulled up almost immediately by some difficulty ... That the precision of his language does not match the precision of his thinking is a common complaint, but Hume is uniquely difficult to interpret because no other thinker probably covers so much ground and says so much with such economy (pp. viii-ix).

This difficulty in understanding Hume's true opinions is surely by Hume's design. His number one goal, as this chapter asserts, was not to try to conform society to his beliefs, but to embed a conviction that governmental authority must lie near the middle. To do this, he often spoke out of both sides of his mouth, calling himself "a Whig, but a very skeptical one" yet siding often with the Tories. He wanted to ensure society continued to play the political game of relative success and compromise instead of absolute victory and loss, something that could only occur if people's natural passions for factions were tamped down. As Sabl (2013) notes, the "hallmark of Humean faction" (p. 48), which he tried to persuade against, was zero-sum behavior. Hume's *History* must be seen as a positive-sum proposition, a text that shows the tragedies of missed coordination opportunities; it is a text that was written to be a coordinating document of Hume's political agenda. It was meant to draw both sides into a centered narrative and create a focal perception of the past.

Often beset by criticism from other scholars, Hume had grown adept at responding to critique and defending his work, but his *History* was not written for critics

alone. Unlike many previous historical works, Hume deliberately made his *History* as accessible as possible to the general public. His books were able to excite audiences through lively and engaging prose, a quality that had been lacking in many earlier historical writings on England. The elegance of the books was not lost on even his harshest critics of the time. “The capacity of this gentleman, for an orderly, and even elegant narration of facts and events, (if *elegance* were necessary in an historian) and for a pleasing, animated delineation of characters, is freely acknowledged” (dissenting clergyman and historian Roger Flexman as cited in Fieser, 2005, p. 2). The approachable quality of his prose was unique, not just as a departure from the typical contemporary history books of his time, but also because it created an alternative source of history for those whose knowledge in the field was mainly based on unwritten accounts and oral tradition, media typically susceptible to exaggerations. The engaging and accessible nature of Hume’s work brought many new readers to the genre who otherwise would have had no interest in reading history, as it previously had required drudging through texts that were long, complex, and dull. As Box (1990) notes, this was central to Hume’s thinking not just with his historical work, but his philosophical writing too. “Hume might easily have argued instead that for society to spurn philosophy is calamitous. It was more like him, though, to make philosophy more appealing and to entice the reader to ‘those noble entertainments’ of the life of mind. It was more like an artist thus to wed instruction with entertainment” (p.52).

Hume tried to encourage the belief in his reader’s mind that safety and calm often lies in the middle. Undoubtedly, he did not expect to convert his reader into a man of

moderation but by describing the stability that lies in the middle, he could nudge his reader into having a positive opinion of the government ruling there. Toward the end of History Book VI, Hume (2015) states, “Extremes of all kinds are to be avoided; and though no one will ever please either faction by moderate opinions, it is there we are most likely to meet with truth and certainty” (pp. 533-534).

In his work, in line with other “philosophical historians,” Hume uses several tools to encourage his readers to be impartial and open to a more moderate view in their interpretation of the past. First, Hume shows how both sides create heroes and villains out of political leaders to fit the narrative they are promoting. As Hume was attempting to write a history that readers of any persuasion would read, he had to strike a balance that would allow all sides to develop skepticism in how they portrayed their own leaders and opponents. He did this by showing the truth to be less clear-cut than the binary hero/villain dynamic allowed, illustrating that leaders were far less capable of predicting grand or devastating effects than those with partisan convictions would give them credit for. Hume veered away from categorizing any figure as “good” or “bad.” Even in cases when Hume considered a particular figure to have had a primarily positive or negative impact on society, he endeavored to point out a few traits, obscure though they may have been, that would balance that leader’s reputation. Generally, most figures in his writing come across as neither overwhelmingly praiseworthy nor fully reproachable.

One example of Hume’s attempt at balance can be seen in his summation of King James II. Although Hume voiced his approval of Parliament’s action to give away James II’s throne to a worthier candidate, viewing James as a leader out of sync with the median

view of the public in his time, he did not follow the trend of other writers who claimed James II was a completely flawed and irredeemable figure:

Thus ended the reign of a prince, whom, if we consider his personal character rather than his public conduct, we may safely pronounce more unfortunate than criminal. He had many of those qualities, which form a good citizen: Even some of those, which, had they not been swallowed up in bigotry and arbitrary principles, serve to compose a good sovereign. *In domestic life, his conduct was irreproachable, and is intitled to our approbation. Severe, but open in his enmities, steady in his counsels, diligent in his schemes, brave in his enterprizes, faithful, sincere, and honourable in his dealings with all men: Such was the character with which the duke of York mounted the throne of England. In that high station, his frugality of public money was remarkable, his industry exemplary, his application to naval affairs successful, his encouragement of trade judicious, his jealousy of national honour laudable:* What then was wanting to make him an excellent sovereign? A due regard and affection to the religion and constitution of his country. Had he been possessed of this essential quality, even his middling talents, aided by so many virtues, would have rendered his reign honourable and happy. When it was wanting, every excellency, which he possessed, became dangerous and pernicious to his kingdoms. (2015, VI, p. 520, emphasis added).

Hume not only trained his readers to appreciate the moderate view regarding leaders but to appreciate moderate arguments made in regards to government authority as well. When writing on a hotly debated historical subject, Hume would often give significant space to the strong and weak arguments on both sides. He usually weighed in at the end with a compromise, or at least with an acknowledgment of the strong points of the side he did not agree with. In fact, Hume gave praise and blame to such an extent in his *History* that he comments in a letter of June 1753 that he was worried his balancing would be misinterpreted. “The truth is, there is so much reason to blame and praise alternately King and Parliament, that I am afraid the mixture of both in my composition, being so equal, may pass sometimes for an affectation, and not the result of judgement

and evidence” (2011, Vol. 1, p.179). John Immerwahr (1989), focusing on a few of Hume’s essays, notes Hume’s fondness for Cicero’s rhetorical dialogue (p. 309). This type of dialogue occurs in Hume’s writing when multiple actors give long uninterrupted arguments making their best case for a cause. Clear examples can be seen throughout Hume’s *History* (Hume, 2015, II, pp.436-438; III, pp. 145-146, 231-232 431-434; V, pp. 93-96, 192-196, 354-356; VI, pp. 171-172, 454-456, 524-525). Immerwahr argues that Hume uses this type of writing to “enhance the spirit of moderation and calmness in his reader.” Hume hoped to move his reader from “dogmatism and its attendant violent passions to a more skeptical view, with its attendant calm passions” (p. 320).

In addition to constructing balanced character assessments and arguments, Hume was very careful to remove the marvelous and unrealistic attribution which he saw particularly in religious, political, and historical works, which he believed drove people to more extreme positions. A prime example of this is Hume’s characterization of Oliver Cromwell, a figure often either beloved or despised by writers. Hume’s overall view of Cromwell is certainly critical, yet he is careful to give credit where it is due and remove credit where it is not, undoing a fault he finds in writers on both sides concerning Cromwell’s history:

The writers, attached to the memory of this wonderful person, make his character, with regard to abilities, bear the air of the most extravagant panegyric: His enemies form such a representation of his moral qualities as resembles the most virulent invective. ... My intention is not to disfigure this picture, drawn by so masterly a hand: *I shall only endeavour to remove from it somewhat of the marvellous; a circumstance which, on all occasions, gives much ground for doubt and suspicion* (Hume 2015, VI, pp. 107-108, emphasis added).

Hume continues, explaining that although Cromwell's success did require some talent, it was not a talent unique to him. Much of Cromwell's success, whether interpreted as good or bad, can be attributed to his being in the right place at the right time.

Hume was even more critical when acts of genius by historical subjects were escalated into miraculous feats that could be explained only by divine intervention. Readers who believed in miraculous events were a clear threat to Hume's goal of a moderate government, as this view tended to discourage compromise. In an earlier essay, "On Miracles," Hume (1975) outlines why miraculous events were improbable and it was unreasonable to believe in them, "as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined" (p. 114). Hume brought this skepticism on miracles to his *History* as well. As discussed previously, the further removed from reality a well-believed tale was, the more unreasonably its believers would behave and the more susceptible they were to being controlled by any authority endorsing that tale.

Hume did not deny that these tales were effective in motivating masses, but he saw that in the long run, miraculous tales often netted negative effects. As Sabl (2013) notes, "Since leadership and discipline, like politics, depend on opinion, the opinion of divine favor may work just as well as the real thing (especially since in Hume's view there is no real thing)... Joan rallied the French because she was chosen by God, and only as long as they believed that; she was a strong focal point but an unstable one" (p. 64). In his *History*, one can see Hume's skepticism of the miraculous in his depiction of the story

of Joan of Arc, where he casts strong doubt on her connection to God. “Her unexperienced mind, working day and night on this favourite object, mistook the impulses of passion for heavenly inspirations; and she fancied, that she saw visions, and heard voices, exhorting her to re-establish the throne of France, and to expel the foreign invaders” (Hume, 2015, II, pp. 397-398). Hume continues to describe Joan of Arc’s rise to power, while cautioning historians about reproducing such tales without criticism. “It is the business of history to distinguish between the miraculous and the marvellous; to reject the first in all narrations merely profane and human; to doubt the second; and when obliged by unquestionable testimony, as in the present case, to admit of something extraordinary, to receive as little of it as is consistent with the known facts and circumstances” (p. 398).

Hume goes on to outline the ways in which Joan of Arc’s story was embellished and made more miraculous in order to galvanize troops. He sought to highlight the danger of a tale not grounded in truth, as it can always be expanded and embellished. Though the feats of Joan of Arc appeared miraculous for a girl with no military background, Hume notes that this too could have been an embellishment. In truth, Joan of Arc could have achieved her success by simply heeding the military generals around her rather than listening to the voice of God. Sabl (2013) argues that Hume’s writings on Joan of Arc are meant to encourage his reader to follow military leaders with “well-earned reputations,” yet this may only be partially true (p. 65). Leaders who held more skill were certainly praised more in Hume’s writings than leaders who relied on myths,

yet throughout Hume's *History* he seems to be encouraging a caution towards unquestioning loyalty to even the more capable of leaders.

Hume was often very careful not to conflate positive outcomes with any "genius" in one's character or negative outcomes with a deficit, realizing the truth was often more complicated, and large macroscopic events usually resulted from numerous less visible factors. As Frederick G. Whelan (2004) notes, "Hume evaluates the characters of his protagonists not in terms of fixed, ideal principles, or from the general point of view of an ideal observer, but from the contextual perspective of the complex historical situations in which they lived and in which their actions were performed, as best as this can be reconstructed" (p. 250). A notable example is Henry VIII. In Hume's estimation, Henry was "sincere, open, gallant, liberal, and capable at least of a temporary friendship and attachment," but was unfortunate in "that the incidents of his reign served to display his faults in their full light" (2015, III, p. 322).

Significant moments, as Hume renders them, are often catalyzed not just from actions but also from opposing reactions, both of which can be praised or criticized. Convincing his readers of this fact could perhaps spread skepticism over axiomatic thinking and beliefs in cure-all solutions, which leave little room for compromise. For example, Hume is careful not to place the blame for the English civil wars of the 1640s solely on King Charles I or Parliament. Hume expresses more sympathy for Charles I, who in the end was removed from his throne and executed, than many historians of his time, but he does not allow him to be a complete victim of his circumstances. Hume goes into detail on the many missteps Charles I made, and although Hume felt that Parliament

overreacted to some of Charles I's actions, it was still within Charles I's control to avoid his fate. "From the mixed character, indeed, of Charles, arose in part the misfortunes, in which England was at this time involved. His political errors, or rather weaknesses, had raised him inveterate enemies: His eminent moral virtues had procured him zealous partizans: And between the hatred of the one, and the affections of the other, was the nation agitated with the most violent convulsions" (2015, V, p. 384).

Even though the main intention of Hume's *History* was to persuade public opinion of the importance of a moderate government, he also gave warning to political leaders who did not yield in some manner to the center opinion. Hume argues that many of the Stuarts' political troubles were not the result of a change in their administration's policies from the previous successful reigns, but from a *lack* of change. A leader has to evolve with his or her people. Many historians in Hume's time argued that the Stuarts' reign failed because they tried to restrain liberty but in his *History*, Hume made it clear that Elizabeth, though much beloved, also imposed restraints on liberty. In many instances, for example, he criticized her allowance of monopolies, which he claims she supported more than her predecessors, restricting the liberty for free trade for many:

She granted her servants and courtiers patents for monopolies; and these patents they sold to others, who were thereby enabled to raise commodities to what price they pleased, and who *put invincible restraints upon all commerce, industry, and emulation in the arts*. It is astonishing to consider the number and importance of those commodities, which were thus assigned over to patentees. Currants, salt, iron, powder, cards, calf-skins, fells, pouldavies, ox-shin-bones, train oil, lists of cloth, pot-ashes, anniseeds, vinegar, sea-coals, steel, aquavita, brushes, pots, bottles, saltpetre, lead, accidents, oil, calamine stone, oil of blubber, glasses, paper, starch, tin, sulphur, new drapery, dried pilchards, transportation of Iron ordnance, of beer, of horn, of leather, importation of Spanish wool, of

Irish yarn: These are but a part of the commodities, which had been appropriated to monopolists (2015, IV, p. 344).

As Klein and Matson (forthcoming) note, the word “restraints” (p. 29) refers to violations of mere-liberty. Had the culture in England not changed with the next ruler’s reign, or had the Stuarts evolved with the culture, they might never have lost power (Hume, 2015, V, p. 19).

In addition to giving a lesson to rulers, Hume’s view helped coordinate multiple sides’ views by including elements from both the Tory and Whig versions of British history. In his essay “The Parties of Great Britain,” Hume (1985) defines a post-1689 Tory as “a lover of monarchy, though without abandoning liberty; and a partisan of the family of STUART.” He defines a Whig as “a lover of liberty though without renouncing monarchy; and a friend to the settlement in the Protestant line” (p. 71). By arguing that the Stuarts were more or less following their predecessors and were not simply tyrants who wanted to expand royal prerogative beyond previous limits, one can be a little more sympathetic to their reigns. On another level, by repainting the Stuart kings as ordinary, relatable people and not villains, as the Whigs made them seem, readers are able to identify more with the monarchy, an institution Hume largely supported, and therefore have more faith that it will act in the people’s best interests. If history were full of examples of villainous kings and queens, no citizen would ever feel any duty or inclination to obey them and instead would want stronger opposition leaders to challenge them.

A frequent refrain in Hume’s *History* is a caution against radical change, as Hume considered society’s stability fragile and difficult to regain once lost. Hume claims the

relative stability of eighteenth-century England arose from a complex series of actions and reactions, and not from a driving force like God, a constitution, or a heroic actor. Given this complexity, any substantial reform puts its society at risk of spiraling into tyranny, especially if the reform is unpopular to a large group. Once violent passions in a society are inflamed, they are hard to suppress. In one of his essays, Hume strongly warns against revolting against the government, even when the government is far from ideal, as risk is usually involved.

Here I must confess, that I shall always incline to their side, who draw the bond of allegiance very close, and consider an infringement of it, as the last refuge in desperate cases, when the public is in the highest danger, from violence and tyranny. For besides the mischiefs of a civil war, which commonly attends insurrection; it is certain, that, where a disposition to rebellion appears among any people, it is one chief cause of tyranny in the rulers, and forces them into many violent measures which they never would have embraced, had every one been inclined to submission and obedience. (1985, p. 490)

Although Hume approved of liberal policies put forward by the government, he did not support a dramatic change of any state, even to the most ideal liberal form. Hume preferred reform to be gradual and steady, allowing culture to have time to adjust to it. For Hume, many people are habit-driven, and any change in circumstance will yield some level of unpredictability.

Although there is room for debate concerning Hume's support of Parliament in the events leading up to the civil war of the 1640s, his support of the revolution of 1688 is clear. Nevertheless, his reasons for this support are still debated. Hume's stance, Forbes (1975/2010) suggests, may have been an uncomfortable one. "The plain fact seems to be that although Hume can defend, quite unambiguously and consistently with his general principles, the present establishment, he cannot unambiguously and

consistently defend those who brought it about” (p. 100). The question of why Hume does not condemn the revolution despite its being, as Forbes asserts, against his general principles is one with no definite answer. It is possible that Hume does this to help diminish the passions of his fellow citizens, rather than truly believing that dethroning James II was a rightful parliamentary act. As previously noted, Hume would on occasion sacrifice a completely honest account with one that would assist in moderating the public’s general outlook. The change in the line of succession due to the revolution continued to spark occasional rebellions. The Jacobite rebellions, occurring sporadically from 1688 to 1746, were uprisings with the aim of restoring James II’s descendants to the throne. Hume himself was very cautious to avoid being thought of as a Jacobite sympathizer and would likely have used prudence in writing anything that would fuel the flames of this rebellion and upset the current government (Hume, 2011, Vol. 1, pp. 263-264). Even if Hume did believe the revolution was unjust, writing this opinion could have come at a high cost to himself and his nation—a cost Hume was unlikely to find worthwhile. As Forbes (1975/2010) notes, “Hume wanted to avoid giving unnecessary offence to either party: and to raise the question of the rights and wrongs of 1688 was only to unnecessarily exacerbate the animosities which he wanted to allay” (p. 97).

An alternative explanation for Hume’s support of the revolution is that he was not as conservative as scholars often attribute him to be. As Merrill (2005) notes, Hume is contradictory and possibly esoteric in his writings on rebellions, stating in his *History* that one could argue that the right of rebellion should be hidden from the public. However, then Hume proceeds to talk at length about the right to rebel. Merrill notes that Hume

acknowledges in one passage of his *History* that there are multiple degrees of resistance to government, each with varying levels of acceptability, depending on the level of tyranny of the government. Although Hume strongly condemns regicide, he admits that it is acceptable in a few select cases; dethroning a king is somewhat more tolerable, and resisting a king is more acceptable still (2015, V, pp. 544-546). Merrill (2005) makes the distinction that contrary to what other scholars have claimed, Hume is not creating limits on rebellions, but rather thresholds for the acceptability of rebellions.

Even if Hume was not as supportive of rebellions as Merrill hints he may be, it is unlikely that Hume was as conservative as he sometimes purported himself to be. The most likely excuse for Hume's support of the 1688 Revolution was that it had great support among the populace and was therefore a less risky venture. Had King James II maintained his throne, he would not have ruled it near the median. Hume goes to lengths to show this successful revolution was an exception, not the rule.

It happens unluckily for those, who maintain an original contract between the magistrate and people, that great revolutions of government, and new settlements of civil constitutions, are commonly conducted with such violence, tumult, and disorder, that the public voice can scarcely ever be heard; and the opinions of the citizens are at that time less attended to than even in the common course of administration. The present transactions in England, it must be confessed, are a *singular exception* to this observation. (2015, VI, p. 528, emphasis added)

It is rare for the public to be so unified against the king as they were in 1688, and thus Hume likely thought it would not have been a risk to support it.

In general, Hume supported proportional public responses to poor leadership. However, he was aware that this type of response did not always occur once the public

was aroused. Dellisanti (2018) points out in his research on innovation in the works of Adam Smith (who was a good friend of Hume's) that Smith was very cautious of being supportive of innovation in public policy as it could lead to great violence. Hume shared this caution. Many times when Hume mentions "innovation" in regard to public policy, it accompanies references to turmoil and violence. Although this is not proof that he opposed rebellions, it does show that he likely wanted rebelling factions to weigh the potential costs of their actions and consider moderating them proportionally. Rebellion should be seen as a risk, and for Hume, should only be considered if a super-majority approve.

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The initial reception to Hume's *History* was tepid to say the least. Prior to its publication, Hume predicted some animosity toward the work. In a letter written in October 1753, Hume acknowledges Book V would find less favor with the Whigs, while Book VI would disappoint the Tories more. "I am sensible, that the History of [the] two first Stuarts will be most agreeable to the Tories: That of the two last, to the Whigs. But we must endeavor to be above any Regard either to Whigs or Tories" (2011a, Vol. 1, p. 180). In many letters written after the publication of Book V, Hume laments not releasing the first two volumes of his *History* at the same time, to balance each other out, or not starting his series with Book III, on the reign of Henry VII. If he had started with that volume, he could have introduced one core yet contentious thesis of the later books—that

the Stuarts were not much different from the previous rulers (Hume, 2011a, Vol 1, pp. 263-264).

Once Book VI was published in 1756, however, criticism of his work started to recede and the popularity of the first two volumes together increased. As Hume admits in his autobiography, Book VI “helped buoy up its unfortunate Brother” (2011a, Vol. 1, p. 5). The effects of the popularity of his works were manifold. First, Hume’s *History* inspired a trend of not only increased consumption of historical books, but increased production. One bookkeeper noted at the time, “Formerly we had few histories of England. Before the publication of Mr. Hume’s first volume, in 1755, we could seldom find above half a score in folio, and two or three of smaller size in the shop of our eminent booksellers; but since that time they have multiplied upon us in great abundance” (Fieser, 2005, p. XIV). One could argue that the increase in both supply and demand of history books was important in order to foster more public discourse over history, which in turn could have helped reduce extreme views.

For Hume, the conversation about history seemed never to be over. Hume not only advised others on what he believed to be the proper way to write history but he was also willing to take advice and was unafraid to revise his own work. As Harris (2016) writes in his biography of Hume, “Correction was as important a part of Hume’s literary life as composition was. No book was ever finished. It was always in the process of being improved” (p. 23). Hume frequently wrote to those with strong historical knowledge asking them to advise him on any errors. Using feedback and new information, Hume made numerous revisions to his works throughout his lifetime. “There is no End of

correcting,” he wrote in March 1763 to one historian, after noting a number of corrections he had made to Book V and VI for a new edition and asking for advice on more (Hume, 2011, Vol. 1, p. 379).

Notably, his revisions were not just over factual errors. He revised also to be more inclusive of both sides’ opinions, to give his *History* the broadest appeal possible. As he wrote in one letter in March 1763, “I have corrected several Mistakes and Oversights, which had chiefly proceeded from the plaguy Prejudices of Whiggism, with which I was too much infected when I began this Work. ... As I began the History with these two Reigns [King James I and Charles I], I now find that they above all the rest, have been corrupted with Whig Rancour” (2011, Vol. 1, p. 379). This claim, which he also makes in his autobiography, is worth questioning, and as Harris (2016) notes, it is likely overplayed. “It is not true that every alteration made was to the Tory side. Hume’s toning down of his treatment of Protestant enthusiasm could be seen as a partial mitigation of his support for the Stuarts, or at least a mitigation of his hostility to their opponents. In ‘My Own Life’, and in his letters, Hume had a tendency to exaggerate the anti-Whig tendencies of his history, presumably to emphasize his independence from the party that was, as he put it in ‘My Own Life,’ ‘in possession of bestowing all places, both in the state and in the literature’” (p. 370).

Although Hume’s impartiality was sometimes in question, it is clearly a virtue he continually strived for and tried to promote among his readers. In many instances in his correspondence, he can be found relishing in the fact that his loyalties are hard to determine. As he wrote in October 1754, “Whether am I Whig or Tory? Protestant or

Papist? Scotch or English? I hope you do not all agree on this head; & that there [are] disputes among you about my principles” (Hume, 2011, Vol. 1, p. 196).

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Hume intended his *History* to encourage political moderation within the English government and to pave the way for a sustainable liberal state. The impulse to romanticize, simplify, and be partisan is an impulse that continually needs to be suppressed in any free society. Hume saw his *History* as one way to do that. In fact, according to Jefferson (1816), he was hugely successful in this venture. “The distinctions of whig & tory will disappear like chaff on a troubled ocean. Indeed they have been disappearing from the day Hume first began to publish his history.” In spite of some factual inaccuracies that have been discovered since its publication, Hume’s series still contains many philosophical truths and still can be seen as a powerful political text.

The rules of civility and conduct have progressed quite a bit since the era of Hume. A person today is less prone to invoke violence over partisanship and factionalization issues and is less susceptible to believing in the miraculous. But human nature can only resist so much of its natural inclinations. The dangerous tendency to hold unreasonable amounts of faith or scorn toward leaders, the folly of believing leaders capable beyond their capacity, or the taking of simplistic narratives or ideologies too seriously are still with us and still drive us to extremes. History is still weaponized in politics. It is still common and effective for politicians, in trying to sway a crowd, to

claim the past was either magnificent or horrible and that it must be restored or resisted. The drive to push government completely toward one's own preferred "system" still manifests itself. Hume's *History* illustrates the dangers in straying too far from truth, moderation, and complexity.

## INTERPRETATIONS OF HUME'S FOOTNOTE ON RACE

In 1753, Hume republished his essay, "Of National Characters." The first sentences of the essay are:

The vulgar are apt to carry all national characters to extremes; and having once established it as a principle, that any people are knavish, or cowardly, or ignorant, they will admit of no exception, but comprehend every individual under the same censure. Men of sense condemn these undistinguishing judgments: Though at the same time, they allow, that each nation has a peculiar set of manners, and that some particular qualities are more frequently to be met with among one people than among their neighbours. (1985, p. 197)

Given this opening, it is remarkable that one of the footnotes Hume added in 1753 could be so "vulgar":

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 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. (1985, pp. 629-630)

Although this footnote was later moved to an endnote and revised (see revisions on p. 53), it still remains an unusually racist passage among all of Hume's works. From the time of its writing through today, it has sparked debate over the extent of Hume's racial bigotry.

The goal of this chapter is to explore the above footnote. In doing so, I will attempt to outline possibilities in Hume's intentions in adding and revising the footnote. This chapter does not advance any decisive conclusion about Hume's intentions, as concrete supporting evidence for either side simply does not seem to exist, but it speculates around two claims, supported by Hume's other relevant works and letters. The two claims (which are not mutually exclusive) that this chapter will explore are these:

1. Hume believed what is exoterically said in the footnote.
2. Hume added the footnote to combat one popular justification for slavery used at the time.

The first claim is very plausible. It seems unlikely the footnote could have been written by someone who did not hold bigoted views on some level against non-whites, views which were not uncommon for the period. The second claim as well is plausible. Hume may have written what he did with the intent to persuade readers away from accepting and supporting slavery. In this chapter, I will argue against the likelihood that the first claim is true *and* the second false. Hume may have intentionally separated the ideas, but his footnote on race, whether he believed it or not, was likely added to advance his opposition to slavery.

If we entertain esotericism as a possibility, an interesting although perhaps unlikely possibility exists: claim one is false and claim two is true. In his book *Philosophy Between the Lines*, Arthur Melzer describes four types of esoteric writing used in Hume's era and prior. Writers who utilize esotericism, as Hume may have done, use dual meanings in their sentences. There is the exoteric – the obvious – meaning and the esoteric – non-obvious – meaning. If Hume did write esoterically on race and slavery, he wrote in what Melzer classifies as political esotericism. Melzer defines political esotericism as “philosophical dissimulation in the service of a political as distinguished from a philosophical or pedagogical project” (p. 238). It was used by writers who dissembled or lied to convince the public to favor a political goal, perhaps in the sincere belief that that goal would be good for the public. If we were to believe Hume wrote in this manner, claim one could be false. Hume would have written something he did not fully believe in order to alter the politics of his time.<sup>2</sup>

As with much esotericism this possibility relies on speculation. The degree to which under this premise, claim one is false, can range anywhere from Hume being uncertain of racial differences to Hume believing they don't exist. If claim one is false, to some degree, what potential advantage might Hume had seen in adding his footnote? Inserting the statement in his work may have been an attempt *to remove* the issue of racial differences from the slavery debate. Hume was well aware of the difficulties of persuading one against a prejudice. By conceding to the racism of his pro-slavery readers,

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<sup>2</sup> In the Appendix to this dissertation, I provide numerous quotations of Hume practicing, acknowledging, or endorsing esotericism.

which he may have seen as a lesser evil, and after gaining their confidence on that score, he could begin to have a less emotionally charged conversation on the costs of slavery.

By allowing the idea of racial differences, those who are not morally outraged by slavery are not alienated by those who are. Moral outrage often accuses the other side of moral corruption, and Hume may have felt, whether that accusation was fair or not, that such an accusation inhibited reform toward more just policy and thinking. It is important to understand that although Hume's texts are contradictory on the issue of race, Hume incisively denounced slavery in both moral and economic terms and at length. These beliefs are clearly outlined in the first section of his long essay, "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations," first published in 1752.<sup>3</sup>

A further explanation which this paper explores, and which yields the same answers to the claims as the esoteric interpretation, is that the footnote was intended as satire. If this interpretation is true, then perhaps rather than Hume trying to blandish slave holders, he was lampooning them. Whether one believed in the esoteric interpretation or the satirical interpretation could depend on how subtle the reader found Hume's most contradictory statements within his work to be. If the contradictions appear more subtle and difficult for many readers to fathom, this may lend support to the esoteric interpretation; more obvious and blatant contradictions would more likely indicate a

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<sup>3</sup> In his life, relative to the period, Hume had little connection to slavery or the slave trade. The only letter which indirectly links him to the institution is due to his role as the private secretary to Lord Hertford between 1763-1766 (Hume, 2011b, p. xxxii). In March 1766, he passed along a message from Sir George Colebroke to Lord Hertford on the potential purchase of plantations in Grenada (Hume, 2014, pp. 65-69). Given his public stance against slavery it is fair to criticize Hume for simply passing along this message without submitting any criticism on the matter. However, without the full context on this interaction, which I hope to look into, it may not be prudent to assume this infringes on his stance against the practice.

satirical interpretation. Or if we want to grant Hume the benefit of the doubt, a generous if unlikely interpretation is that this all may have been an attempt to thread a very fine needle of having the footnote read literally by slave holders and slavery's supporters, esoterically by another more critical group, and satirically by a third group. In this way the satirical interpretation is just an extension, or another layer, of the esoteric interpretation.

Yet there is still another possibility: Both claims, one and two, are true. Hume may have added the footnote, believing its exoteric meaning but also hoping it would assist his attack on slavery. If there is not enough evidence to convince us that Hume was engaging in political esotericism or satire, a healthy level of skepticism is after all something Hume would have appreciated, then the most likely possibility is that both claims are true. This possibility, therefore, should be considered the default assumption.

The level of thought which Hume employed in his writing in order to convince and persuade the public has been widely documented. Perhaps it is most thoroughly described by M.A. Box. In his book, *The Suasive Art of David Hume*, Box (1990) maintains that Hume's true intentions are sometimes hard to decipher:

Unfortunately his statements on the writing of philosophy are few. He did not often record his authorial intentions, and never did so with much specificity. Possibly he did not formulate them in the detail that students of literature are accustomed to discover in the works they examine. And even when he makes pertinent statements it is often risky to take them at face value. As in the interpretation of his philosophy, it is necessary to reconcile apparent contradictions by referring individual statements to the wider contexts of his writing as a whole and of the culture in which he lived. It is necessary to recreate the milieu in which he executed his works, and to adopt a Humean spirit, in order to uncover his unstated, perhaps only vaguely formulated, aesthetic values and aims. (p. 7)

The most important method for spotting esotericism is to find contradictions within a text. On the issue of race, Hume contradicted himself frequently and starkly. This chapter argues that Hume's racism cannot be taken for granted, even if it remains a possible motivation for some of what he's written. There is a strong possibility that Hume's contradictory statements on race may be there by design.

### **I. Literature on the Footnote**

Much has been written about Hume's infamous footnote on race. The majority of what has been recently written tends to favor claim one, mentioned above, and ignore claim two. Most of these writings are split between arguments that Hume was racist and that this was an implicit part of his theory, or that, while Hume was racist, it did not tend otherwise to impact his works. For most of these modern writers, Hume's ideas on race and slavery are separate matters, which was certainly not the case in his own time.

Richard H. Popkin, who rekindled the debate in 1973 in his essay, "The Philosophical Basis of Eighteenth-Century Racism," argues that Hume's opinions of non-whites were not a "fleeting observation." He notes, "It is intimately related to his thought, and to one of the problems of eighteenth-century thought—the justification of European superiority over the rest of mankind" (1973, p. 246).

John Immerwahr, in his 1992 essay, "Hume's Revised Racism," also proposes that Hume held racist views which were deliberate and considered. I consider it likely that on this, Immerwahr is right. Studying the revisions of the footnote, he notes that the

change in language does shield Hume from accusations of holding polygenesis beliefs that different human races had different origins, which Immerwahr argues for Hume were “either non-existent or superficial” (p. 485). Nevertheless, he notes, the revision also highlights the strength of his bigotry towards blacks. Summarizing his position, Immerwahr writes, “The fact that Hume revised the note further proves that Hume's racism was deliberate rather than casual. The revision proves that Hume did seriously consider objections to his racist position. His response, however, was to sharpen his attack on blacks further. His racism should thus be read as something he was willing to defend, rather than as an offhand remark” (p. 486).

In 1995, Robert Palter asserts the footnote was first added as a way to differentiate Hume's work from that of Montesquieu's (whose writing Hume felt weighed too heavily on the importance of climate as an influencing factor on societies). Although, Palter writes, Hume added the footnote to strengthen his argument on national character, he should have realized the errors in his own logic. “The scholarship, though, is flawed, being based on what Hume himself should have recognized as some extremely weak inductions” (p. 6). Hume's weak induction and empirical skills regarding race is a theme repeated by many modern commentators. Palter concedes Hume's racism towards blacks, while noting that Hume was ahead of many others in his time in his call for abolition. He highlights the odd alternative standpoint of some in Hume's era who opposed racism while still supporting slavery (pp. 8-9).

In his 2000 essay, “Hume, Race, and Human Nature,” Emmanuel Eze tries to establish a connection between Hume's footnote and an attitude towards blacks that was

implicitly in Hume's theory on human nature. Yet creating a strong link with Hume's other work is hard to do as Hume never directly expands on his negative view towards blacks. In fact, as this chapter will discuss, Hume contradicts the footnote in other writings. Palter notes: "In Hume's voluminous writing there is apparently just a single passage which is definitely racist in its import" (p. 4).

Of all the writers who have explored the footnote in question, perhaps Silvia Sebastiani (2013) dives to the greatest depth, in her chapter "Hume versus Montesquieu" of her book *The Scottish Enlightenment*. Her conclusion is largely that the footnote expands and clarifies the ideas in Hume's other writings. Looking for Hume's incentive to articulate transparently his racist beliefs, she directly ties the footnote to Hume's essay on slavery. Additionally, she suggests Hume's supposed belief of polygenesis is related to his general opposition to biblical stories (p. 41). This is certainly a possible conclusion, as Hume was a celebrated religious skeptic. Yet the possibility that Hume was disingenuous in his writing of the footnote, or that it was placed there as a tool to convince his pro-slavery readers against slavery, is a plausible possibility that, to my knowledge, has not yet been explored in the literature.

## **II. Aristotle, Christianity, and the Spanish Debate on Race and Slavery**

Although Hume's writings on race and on slavery should be examined together, we must understand the context in which they were written and understand why Hume kept them apart. By the mid-18th century, issues of race and slavery had become strongly

intertwined. Many arguments against slavery also argued all men were equal, while the arguments for slavery tended to assert some type of natural inferiority among the slaves. Justification and opposition of slavery often drew from two sources: Aristotle and Christianity.

Aristotle's views on slavery were important in Hume's time and prior. Moreover, they can serve as a potential example of esotericism. Aristotle's views are far from explicit, and yet modern scholars have mostly taken Aristotle's writings on slavery at face value, in contrast to many of his other writings. As Malcolm Heath (2008) points out:

Aristotelian specialists seem reluctant to invest in the theory of natural slavery the boundless energy that has been devoted to making sense of, for example, *Metaphysics Z*. The theory is, indeed, easy to dismiss: we know that it is false; we can easily explain it away as a product of ideological bias; and Aristotle gives a very inadequate account of it...Here, ideological repugnance has proved a deterrent. But Aristotle has a good track-record for intelligent reasoning. (p. 244)

As slavery in Hume's time was not met with the universal repugnance it is today, and in fact there were a myriad of views on the subject, scholars of that era may have read Aristotle differently. They may have examined Aristotle's contradictions more closely to see if they could glean any alternative meanings, rather than just reading it at face value and writing off the weak argument he gives. At the very least, it is apparent that there was debate over the degree to which Aristotle actually supported slavery.

According to Melzer (2014), many scholars during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries "attribute esotericism to virtually *all* ancient philosophers and philosophic poets and seem to regard this fact as well-known" (p. 14). To Melzer, Aristotle was an exemplar of

a philosopher who wrote with dual meanings (p. 31), and he suggests slavery may have been one topic on which Aristotle wrote esoterically (pp. 196 & 323). Slavery was widely accepted in Aristotle's time so it would not be surprising that if he had some doubts about the practice, those doubts would have been hidden so only those of a certain mind and openness could recognize them.

Aristotle deals with slavery largely in the first book of *Politics*, assessing what is just and unjust slavery. There are two types of enslavement: slavery by convention and natural slavery. Slavery by convention, or law or force, is unjust. For example, if someone were enslaved because of defeat in war in which the victor waged war unjustly, his slavery is unjust. Natural slavery, however, is just. To be a natural slave, one must lack the ability for deliberation and foresight (Pol. 1.13 1260a12-13). Natural slavery, for Aristotle, is not hereditary (Pol. 1.6 1255b1-3), but determined by one's abilities. Who is a natural slave, and who is not, is not often easy to determine:

Nature indeed wishes to make the bodies of free persons and slaves different as well as their souls—those of the latter strong with a view to necessary needs, those of the former straight and useless for such tasks, but useful with a view to a political way of life (which is itself divided between the needs of war and those of peace); yet the opposite often results, some having the bodies of free persons while others have the souls. It is evident, at any rate, that if they were to be born as different only in body as the images of the gods, everyone would assert that those not so favored merited being their slaves. But if this is true in the case of the body, it is much more justifiable to make this distinction in the case of the soul; yet it is not as easy to see the beauty of the soul as it is that of the body. (Pol. 1.5 1254b27-38)

Aristotle implies that there are not clear and focal grounds to determine who is a natural slave, and that many who are enslaved are not so-called natural slaves.

Determining that someone is a natural slave is not enough to justify his enslavement. The slave must be enslaved by a natural master. A natural master must be virtuous and must not abuse his authority in being a master, for doing so is not only harmful to the slave but also the master himself. However, if the master can restrain himself, slavery is beneficial to both the slave and the master (Pol. 1.6 1255b10-15).

In an exoteric reading of Aristotle, there are significant limits on what type of slavery is just, and unjust slavery can pose a problem to the balance of greater society. Some modern scholars have argued that Aristotle's argument for slavery was further restricted than often realized. Wayne Ambler (1987), in "Aristotle on Nature and Politics: The Case of Slavery," argues that although Aristotle does support natural slavery, this type of slavery was not similar to the actual slavery that existed in his time, or for that matter what existed thereafter. Aristotle is careful to distinguish between natural and actual slavery and moreover, according to Ambler, he never argues in support of actual slavery. Although, outside of a couple of criticisms of some forms of actual slavery, Aristotle does not directly oppose the practice, Ambler points out how different natural slavery was from what ancient Greeks thought of as slavery. Thus, in his time, Aristotle may have been challenging the status quo more than it at first appears.

In *Aristotle's Teaching in the Politics*, Thomas Pangle (2013) questions even the theoretical possibility of a slave and master as Aristotle describes, writing: "What is sought for, and what would be necessary, in a human slave whose slavery would be both beneficial and justified, is a combination of two contradictory things: on the one hand, a well-formed, effective human, who could accomplish very complex tasks as our assistant;

and, on the other hand, a human who needs to belong wholly to another, on account of his inability to exercise self-rule even sufficiently to survive without a keeper” (p. 46).

Pangle describes as well the difficulty of being a natural master. “Aristotle has quietly pointed to the following Socratic suggestion (cf. Plato *Cleitophon* 408a-b; Xenophon *Mem.* 1.5.5, 4.5.2-6). *Only* those who have beautiful, godlike souls, with an inner hierarchy of virtue—only those who are truly excellent psychic specimens—are, by *nature*, or *truly*, free; and only such would be by nature truly capable and deserving of mastery, over the rest of us, for our benefit (even though the rest of us are mainly not natural slaves in the sense previously defined)” (p. 47). If the concepts of a natural slave and master do not have any incarnation, then perhaps we can take it that Aristotle is insinuating that slavery should not exist.

Aristotle’s writings were at times contradictory and left plenty of room for scholarly debate. They serve as an example of what we may find in Hume’s writings on race. Even though Hume is not thought of as an esoteric writer to the degree that Aristotle is, there is some indication he occasionally wrote in this manner. Hume has commonly been thought of as difficult to interpret. As Duncan Forbes notes:

Hume is terrible campaign country, rugged, broken, cross-grained, complex, remorseless in its demands. One has to fight every inch of the way, and can never feel really secure. No interpretation ever seems to get going before it is pulled up almost immediately by some difficulty ... That the precision of his language does not match the precision of his thinking is a common complaint, but Hume is uniquely difficult to interpret because no other thinker probably covers so much ground and says so much with such economy. (1975/2010, pp. viii-ix)

The practice of camouflaging genuine opinions with an exoteric front allows for alternative sides to debate over interpretation. Potentially some of this ambiguity in language is thus due not to error, but intent. Some works last far longer thanks to their ability to continually spur academic disagreements.

Besides Aristotle, Christianity too played a significant role in the slavery debate. Thomas Aquinas was one of the first major figures in Christianity to adopt Aristotle's ideas in *Politics* and merge them with the teachings of the Bible:

There is also found an order among men themselves. Indeed, those who excel in understanding naturally gain control, whereas those who have defective understanding, but a strong body, seem to be naturally fitted for service, as Aristotle says in his *Politics*. The view of Solomon is also in accord with this, for he says: "The fool shall serve the wise" (Prov. 11:29); and again: "Provide out of all the people wise men such as fear God . . . who may judge the people at all times". (Exod. 18:2 1-22) (Aquinas, 1956, p. 273)

Aquinas maintains Aristotle's justification that a form of slavery or servitude may be appropriate for those who are less intelligent, but he does not mention any ethnic or racial component. That sort of addition only started to be advanced in the 16<sup>th</sup> century as Spain ventured into the New World. The Valladolid debate in 1550 occurred when the Spanish King Charles called together a group of jurists and theologians to determine the morality of the Spanish conquest of the Americas. One of the questions up for debate was whether the Spanish had a right, in keeping with the Catholic faith, to enslave Amerindians, the Indigenous people already living in the Americas. The two key players in this debate were Juan Ginés Sepúlveda and Bartolomé de las Casas.

Sepúlveda borrowed Aristotle's argument for natural slaves, adding an unambiguous racial element to it and, like Aquinas, combined it with aspects of Christianity. For Sepúlveda, Amerindians were less human than the Europeans, or "half-man," and thus did not need to be treated equally. Some of his arguments from the debate can be read in his Latin dialogue, "Democrates Alter, Or, on the Just Causes for War Against the Indian":

You can well understand...if you know the customs and manners of different peoples, that the Spanish have a perfect right to rule these barbarians of the New World and the adjacent islands, who in prudence, skill, virtues, and humanity are as inferior to the Spanish as children to adults, or women to men, **for there exists between the two as great a difference as between savage and cruel races and the most merciful, between the most intemperate and the moderate and temperate and, I might even say, between apes and men.**

You surely do not expect me to recall at length the prudence and talents of the Spanish... **Compare, then, these gifts of prudence, talent, magnanimity, temperance, humanity, and religion with those possessed by these half-men (homunculi), in whom you will barely find the vestiges of humanity, who not only do not possess any learning at all, but are not even literate or in possession of any monument to their history except for some obscure and vague reminiscences of several things put down in various paintings; nor do they have written laws, but barbarian institutions and customs...** **Although some of them show a certain ingenuity for various works of artisanship, this is no proof of human cleverness, for we can observe animals, birds, and spiders making certain [sic] structures which no human accomplishment can competently imitate.** And as for the way of life of the inhabitants of New Spain and the province of Mexico, I have already said that these people are considered the most civilized of all, and they themselves take pride in their public institutions, because they have cities created in a rational manner and kings who are not hereditary but elected by popular vote, and among themselves they carry on commercial activities in the manner of civilized peoples. But see how they deceive themselves, and how much I dissent from such an opinion, seeing, on the

contrary, in these very institutions a proof of the crudity, the barbarity, and the natural Slavery of these people; for having houses and some rational way of life and some sort of commerce is a thing which the necessities of nature itself induce, and only serves to prove that they are not bears or monkeys and are not totally lacking in reason. (Sepúlveda, par. 20-22, boldface added)

For Sepúlveda, who never actually visited the Americas, societies without certain benchmarks of development do not deserve equal liberty to what he considered better developed nations and enslaving Amerindians was in some way doing them a favor. It was a way to start them on the path towards civilization. Amerindians would obviously disagree.

Las Casas, who spent many years in the Americas, countered that Sepúlveda misread Aristotle and asserted that the Amerindians were equal to Europeans, even better in some instances. As Brunstetter and Zartner (2011) note, “While Sepúlveda assumes a black and white world view in which the categories of civilized and barbarians are mutually exclusive, and the relationship between the two is one of hierarchy, Las Casas suggests that barbarism is a purely conventional term in the same way that ‘the Greeks called the Romans barbarians, and, in turn, the Romans called the Greeks and other nations of the world barbarians’” (p. 740).

Although Las Casas does not go so far as to say all slavery is wrong - in fact, he briefly supported the slavery of blacks - he states that under a correct interpretation of Aristotle, slavery is not meant for those who are capable of self-governance, nor is it meant for anyone considered to be a barbarian, a term Aristotle uses multiple ways. “From what has been said, then, the distinction made by the Philosopher between the two

types of barbarian seems clear.... Not all barbarians are either lacking in reason or slaves by nature, nor can they, for merely being barbarians, be subjugated by force if they possess kingdoms and are free” (1997, par. 16). Later, Las Casas reasserts the trouble with calling an entire nation of people natural slaves. “These peoples of the Indies are not of the first category [barbarians as natural slaves], because all in that one are accidental and not natural (we will not explain here what is natural, or nearly so), and such defects cannot by nature befall a whole nation; for it would be a great monstrosity of human lineage if nature were to err to the extent of making men of one nation furious and foppish, foolish or blind with passion” (p. 38).

Brian Tierney observes that in his last major work, Las Casas became an even stronger supporter of the right to liberty. He writes of Las Casas’s argument:

that a group of people could have a right either as a corporate whole or as separate individuals. In the first case the consent of a majority was sufficient; in the second case the consent of each individual was required. Las Casas maintained that this latter kind of consent—individual consent—was needed to legitimize Spanish rule over the Indians. Where the right to liberty was concerned, the consent of a whole people could not prejudice a single person withholding consent. (1994, p. 9)

### **III. Hume’s Passage in the Second *Enquiry* (1751) and Polygenism**

According to Tierney, Las Casas and other thinkers, “stirred up by the discovery of America,” reframed the idea of natural rights in a way that persisted throughout Europe (p. 10). Hume seems to allude to the debate in an important passage in his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, published in 1751.

Were there a species of creatures intermingled with men, which, though rational, were possessed of such inferior strength, **both of body and mind, that they were incapable of all resistance, and could never, upon the highest provocation, make us feel the effects of their resentment;** the necessary consequence, I think, is that we should be **bound by the laws of humanity to give gentle usage to these creatures, but should not, properly speaking, lie under any restraint of justice with regard to them, nor could they possess any right or property, exclusive of such arbitrary lords.** Our intercourse with them could not be called society, which supposes a degree of equality; but absolute command on the one side, and servile obedience on the other. Whatever we covet, they must instantly resign: Our permission is the only tenure, by which they hold their possessions: Our compassion and kindness the only check, by which they curb our lawless will: And as no inconvenience ever results from the exercise of a power, so firmly established in nature, the restraints of justice and property, being totally *useless*, would never have place in so unequal a confederacy.

**This is plainly the situation of men, with regard to animals;** and how far these may be said to possess reason, I leave it to others to determine. **The great superiority of civilized Europeans above barbarous Indians, tempted us to imagine ourselves on the same footing with regard to them, and made us throw off all restraints of justice, and even of humanity, in our treatment of them.** (pp. 190-191, boldface added)

This passage, Sebastiani (2013) argues, also can be seen to indicate Hume's belief in multiple species of men. The beginning of the original version of Hume's footnote indicates Hume believed there were four or five "other species of men." Whether Hume believed in multiple species, and what that would even mean, relates to understanding his view of race. Sebastiani notes that Hume is likely alluding to Carl Linnaeus's theory of the four types of humans: American, European, Asiatic, and African. Sebastiani writes, "In Linnaeus's scheme, Hume could find confirmation of his experimental principles. The history of the different human types showed that the gap between the civil characters

of the Europeans and the rude ones of the non-White peoples was rooted in nature” (p. 35).

Polygenism is the theory that a multiplicity of wholly separate origins gave rise to a variety of human races (“species”). Polygenism was occasionally used by defenders of slavery, as it conveniently implied that slave and slaveholder were *not* the extended kin of a single great human species. Some, like Edward Long, who believed whites and blacks were of a different species, would even question the fertility of bi-racial parents, likening bi-racial children to mules (Seth, 2014, p. 765). Sebastiani (2013) notes, “In the mid-eighteenth century, the language of science was instable, if not ambiguous. In this sense the allusion to different ‘species’ in humankind might not be so significant in itself as to define Hume as a supporter of polygenesis. However, his reference to an original distinction made by nature left no room for doubt” (p. 34).

Outright assertions of polygenism were rarely used even by those with pro-slavery beliefs in Hume’s time, but many walked right up to the line of polygenism with phrases like Sepúlveda’s “half-men” or wording similar to Hume’s in his revised footnote on race. Some writers supported the less controversial degeneracy theory, that all men have the same origin yet due to various factors, like environment or nutrition, some races’ abilities have diminished. Polygenism was controversial as it was also seen as an attack on Christianity. The Biblical tale of Adam and Eve provides a monogenism theory that all humans come from the same origin. This explains why many on the pro-slavery side were careful not to directly cross the line into polygenism. Yet it was not only those who supported slavery who questioned monogenism. Voltaire, who is thought to have

opposed slavery, also questioned monogenism, possibly as a way to implicitly question Christianity.

Hume's passage quoted above could be interpreted, as Sebastiani does, to implicitly substantiate that Hume thought there were distinctly different types of humans. Further, one could see how Hume may be stating that the definition of justice differs based on one being European or Amerindian. Sebastiani understands Hume to believe that "The rational connection of justice to public utility excluded its applicability in an extremely unequal relationship, like the one that had historically developed between Europe and America" (p. 39).

On the other hand, the passage's moral stance is far from being clear. In fact, it could alternatively be read that Hume was calling the Europeans unjust in their treatment of Amerindians. If Hume was condemning the actions of the Spanish during this period, it would not be uncommon or radical of him. The English commonly chastised the Spanish for their inhumane treatment of the Indians as a way to attack the Spanish and Catholic culture (Maltby, 1971). Besides, this passage does not necessarily confirm that Hume thought there were different types of men, merely that he acknowledged others did. These others may be the people Hume was trying to convince with the lengthy anti-slavery segment of his "Populousness" essay.

As will be seen, in the final version of the footnote from 1777, Hume removed the suggestion of different species from the first sentence of his footnote. Why he did this is unknown, but as Immerwahr (1992) suggests, "it is most likely that he originally used the term 'species' in a casual and non-technical way" (p.485). By the 1770s, with the pro-

slavery writings of Edward Long and Samuel Estwick, it may have become clear to Hume how his wording was being interpreted, so he altered the language.

#### **IV. Of National Characters, Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations, and Contradictions**

Hume's essay, "Of National Characters," was first published in 1748—*without* the infamous footnote—along with two other essays in *Three Essays, Moral and Political*. In 1753, the essay was added to Volume 1 of his *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*. In this version of the essay there were numerous revisions, including the addition of the infamous footnote on race.

The year prior, in 1752, another very long essay appeared, "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations." The first section (pp. 383-398 of the modern edition) gave a strong condemnation of the practice of slavery, remarkable for its time. Hume was transparently using arguments against slavery in the past to persuade his modern reader of its immorality and inefficiencies in the present. It appeared in his second edition of his *Political Discourse* in 1752 and later was added to his *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects* in Volume 4 in 1754.

Like many of Hume's works, both essays underwent multiple rounds of tweaking in language up until the final version. As such, one might expect some consistency in sentiments between the two essays in their final versions, but as we will see, that was not

the case. In regards to the footnote, most of the substantive revisions on race occurred in the 1770 and the final 1777 editions of his *Essays*<sup>4</sup>:

I am apt to suspect the negroes ~~and in general all other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds)~~ to be naturally inferior to the whites. There ~~never~~ *scarcely ever* was a civilized nation of ~~any other complexion than white~~ *that complexion*, 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 between these breeds of men. Not to mention our colonies, 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. In JAMAICA, indeed, they talk of one negroe as a man of parts and learning; but it is likely he is admired for ~~very~~ slender accomplishments, like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly. (Hume, 1985, p. 208, emphasis and strikethrough added to mark revisions)

Both the original footnote, which largely went unaltered for over 20 years, and its revisions will be discussed. To piece together Hume's thoughts on the footnote, we must first examine both "Of National Characters" and "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations," as, even though they were separated, likely by design, they are both part of the same argument. There are some noteworthy overlaps between the two essays. In both essays, Hume engages the arguments of Aristotle, Montesquieu, and a moderate minister named Dr. Robert Wallace. Hume's engagement with Wallace in particular is seen by

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<sup>4</sup> As noted by Aaron Garrett, there were a few minor adjustments to the footnote prior to the 1770 edition. In 1770, Garrett notes that "very" was struck to describe Francis Williams' "slender accomplishments." See (Garrett, 2000, p. 172). In addition to what Garrett describes, in the 1770 edition "scarcely ever" was substituted for "never."

many as very amicable. As Robert B. Luehrs (1987) notes, “The two philosophers conducted their debate in public and private so amiably, with almost exaggerated respect for each other's arguments, that the whole affair was deemed the very model of enlightened discourse” (p. 321). It was a far cry from Hume’s relationship with another of his critics, James Beattie; that relationship evidenced much animosity.

#### **a. Of National Characters and the Causes of Cultural Differences**

Looking first at the essay “Of National Characters,” we see generalizations between the cultures of countries and the reasons for their differences. Although at the start of the essay he asserts that no generalization of a group should be thought to represent all members, we see in the footnote Hume doing just such categorical generalization, and in the most extreme degree. In his essay, Hume notes two general sets of causes for differences in cultures: “moral” and “physical.” Moral causes he describes as “circumstances...which render a peculiar set of manners habitual to us.” In this category would be elements like government, public affairs, or poverty. There were also physical causes, “air and climate” (1985, p. 198). Montesquieu, in his *L’Esprit des lois* (1748), as well as Aristotle, tended to put more weight towards physical causes playing a role in shaping culture, but for Hume moral causes were primary. “As to physical causes, I am inclined to doubt altogether of their operation in this particular; nor do I think, that men owe any thing of their temper or genius to the air, food, or climate” (1985, p. 200).

A potential third kind of cause for variation in cultures, which Hume does not directly name but which are presented in the footnote in question, are genetic causes that correlate with race. One might count this as a “physical” cause, yet to add clarity we will consider it separately. Although this footnote certainly asserts race to be a factor, there are points in the same essay where Hume contradicts, or at least calls into question, the importance of genetics.

In the last section of Hume’s essay, he reasserts that physical and racial causes are at best secondary factors on the mind. Hume starts by noting the two best cases for physical causes to have an effect:

**The only observation, with regard to the difference of men in different climates, on which we can rest any weight, is the vulgar [common] one, that people in the northern regions have a greater inclination to strong liquors, and those in the southern to love and women.** One can assign a very probable physical cause for this difference. Wine and distilled waters warm the frozen blood in the colder climates, and fortify men against the injuries of the weather: As the genial heat of the sun, in the countries exposed to his beams, inflames the blood, and exalts the passion between the sexes. (p. 213, boldface added)

Hume wrestles with the above premise. In the next paragraph he counters these two cases stating, “Perhaps too, the matter may be accounted for by moral causes. All strong liquors are rarer in the north, and consequently are more coveted...On the other hand, the heat in the southern climates, obliging men and women to go half naked, thereby renders their frequent commerce more dangerous, and inflames their mutual passion" (p. 213).

Hume then casts doubt on these best cases being indicative of anything, regardless of the cause. “But perhaps the fact is doubtful, that nature has, either from moral or physical causes, distributed these respective inclinations to the different climates” (pp.

213-214). Hume proceeds to do what he had done frequently in his analytical writing and lists exceptions to this rule, noting many examples of people from warmer climates who put high values on strong liquor. He gives counter-examples starting with the Greeks: “The ancient Greeks, though born in a warm climate, seem to have been much addicted to the bottle; nor were their parties of pleasure any thing but matches of drinking among men, who passed their time altogether apart from the fair. Yet when Alexander led the Greeks into Persia, a still more southern climate, they multiplied their debauches of this kind, in imitation of the Persian manners” (p. 214).

After noting a few more particular examples, Hume gives a more derogatory reference to Africans, stating, “You may obtain any thing of the Negroes by offering them strong drink; and may easily prevail with them to sell, not only their children, but their wives and mistresses, for a cask of brandy” (p. 214).<sup>5</sup> The example Hume gives is likely premised by the slave trade, as slaves were frequently sold by African slave traders for liquors, particularly French brandy (Alpern, 1995, pp. 24-26). Regardless of whether Hume impute any truth to the statement, it is a very crude generalization, far worse than his remarks on other cultures. Hume does not argue that the reason for this action by individuals in black cultures is physical, racial, or moral; he uses it as a counter-example to the argument that “people in the northern regions have a greater inclination to strong liquors.” Possibly, following his previous logic, it would be due to the scarcity of strong liquors in Africa. Nonetheless, outside of the footnote, this is the most racially bigoted

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<sup>5</sup> In this sentence Hume originally used “parents” in the place of “children”. It was changed with his final revisions in the 1777 edition of this essay.

statement in all of Hume's works. Hume then proceeds to give more counter-examples against his two best cases for physical causes from other cultures.

Finally, Hume sums up his argument by saying:

But supposing the fact true, that nature, by physical principles, has regularly distributed these two passions, the one to the northern, the other to the southern regions; we can only infer, that the climate may affect the grosser and more bodily organs of our frame; not that it can work upon those finer organs, on which the operations of the mind and understanding depend. And this is agreeable to the analogy of nature. The races of animals never degenerate when carefully tended; and horses, in particular, always show their blood in their shape, spirit, and swiftness: But a coxcomb may beget a philosopher; as a man of virtue may leave a worthless progeny. (p. 215)

We see in the first sentence Hume downplaying the influence of physical causes, at least on the human mind and understanding. In the last sentence, Hume implies that the parents being of certain race would by no means determine human worth in the progeny. This sentence again tends to subvert the exoteric message of the infamous footnote. Hume here appears to be asserting that race (or breed) is more influential in animals than it is in humans. He may also be echoing Aristotle, who argues we cannot determine a natural slave by lineage. "For they claim that from the good should come someone good, just as a human being comes from a human being and a beast from beasts. But while nature wishes to do this, it is often unable to" (Pol. 1.6 1255b1-4).

Though the above paragraph appears to counter Hume's footnote on race, Sebastiani, in a piece written with Aaron Garrett, (2017) surmises that Hume's footnote was actually meant to clarify the paragraph. The above paragraph, they argue, does not fully answer the question of how to "distinguish between a group of people that has

permanently diminished operations of the mind and understanding due to the qualitative actions of climate and those who have consistently diminished content on which the mind and understanding operate due to moral causes?” The added footnote, they contend, was meant to complete Hume’s answer to the question. They argue that for Hume, a long-term intergenerational lack of a certain quality in people, like geniuses, can help determine whether that lack of quality is a racial characteristic. Hume further attempts to provide proof of the importance of race, in their reading, by pointing in the footnote to those who were transported out of Africa to Europe who he believed still showed no genius (p. 36). Again, Hume’s writing can be read in different ways. If you’re looking for contradictions in Hume’s works, as the present chapter often does, you will find contradictions. If you’re looking for consistency in his work, you likewise can highlight consistency. Perhaps Hume did intend the footnote to be a clarification, yet if we examine another footnote, we can see that perhaps Hume was trying to add arguments to both sides of the debate.

Our racist footnote wasn’t the only one that Hume newly introduced in the 1753 version of “Of National Characters.” In another footnote Hume presents potentially two views on the effects of moral causes as a reason for differences among societies, one arguably including race as a factor and the other dismissing it. The footnote was added to a question in the text asking why an animal’s character changes when moved to a different climate, yet a man’s does not:

CÆSAR (de Bello GALLICO, lib. 1. [*The Gallic War* 4.2 in the Loeb edition]) says, that the GALLIC horses were very good; the GERMAN very bad. We find in lib. vii. [7.65] that he was obliged to remount some

GERMAN cavalry with GALLIC horses. At present, no part of EUROPE has so bad horses of all kinds as FRANCE: But GERMANY abounds with excellent war horses. **This may beget a little suspicion, that even animals depend not on the climate; but on the different breeds, and on the skill and care in rearing them.** The north of ENGLAND abounds in the best horses of all kinds which are perhaps in the world. In the neighbouring counties, north side of the TWEED, no good horses of any kind are to be met with. STRABO [64 or 63 bc–ad 21], lib. ii [Geography 2.3.7] rejects, in a great measure, the influence of climates upon men. **All is custom and education, says he. It is not from nature, that the ATHENIANS are learned, the LACEDEMONIANS ignorant, and the THEBANS too, who are still nearer neighbours to the former.** Even the difference of animals, he adds, depends not on climate. (1985, p. 202, boldface added)

Reading the words in the first emboldened sentence, “that even animals,” the implication seems clear that Hume is noting a similarity regarding humans and animals, that even animals are influenced thus, so humans must certainly be. The claim here is that different human capabilities depend on different breeds, or races, and how they are raised. Then again “different breeds” may have only been added to the footnote since animals are the main subject of the statement. If Hume is entertaining the idea that race is a factor in human characteristics, in the second emboldened section he is countering this opinion by citing Strabo. Later in the passage that this footnote follows from, Hume seems to side more with Strabo’s stance, emphasizing the importance of custom and education, or moral causes.

Hume’s style of writing can be perilous because even a single point of misinterpretation can alienate or lose a reader altogether. The benefits, however, may outweigh the costs, as it can promote perennial dialogue between groups who interpret the ideas differently. If Hume did intend to write in this manner, it was as a way to draw

readers from both sides into scrutinizing and dwelling in his work, in a manner similar to, but to a lesser degree, Aristotle and other great philosophers. For Hume, conversation and debate between individuals was essential to creating good reasoning. As Jacqueline Taylor (2017) notes when analyzing Hume's *Enquiry*, "While it is clear that some people will be better moral evaluators than others, Hume suggests that the cultivation of good reasoning is often a collective endeavor that takes place through active debate and discourse. In some cases, we need good reasoning to make sense of complex moral situations: this includes gathering and sorting through the relevant facts, making the right sort of distinctions, and comparing the current case to past situations" (p. 124).

#### **b. Populousness and Hume's Separation of Slavery and Race**

Looking next at Hume's Essay, "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations," we see he also points to moral causes as being significant in population growth. This essay was a direct response to Wallace's manuscript, read by Hume in 1751. Hume urged Wallace to publish his arguments, which he did in *A Dissertation on the Numbers of Mankind in Antient and Modern Times* in 1753 (Hume, 1985, p. 379, footnote 2). Montesquieu took part, with Hume's encouragement, in helping publish both works in French. To a large extent, all three authors opposed slavery, yet all had some type of argument in their works which could speak in its favor as well.

In "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations," Hume counters the popular view, shared by Wallace, that ancient nations had a larger population than contemporary ones.

This argument was not trivial. As Wallace (1753) states, “The question concerning the number of mankind in ancient and modern times, under antient or modern governments, is not to be considered as a matter of pure curiosity, but of the greatest importance; since it must be a strong presumption in favour of the customs or policy of any government, if, ceteris paribus, it is able to raise up and maintain a greater number of people” (p. 14). Hume echoes this sentiment near the beginning of his essay stating, “But if every thing else be equal, it seems natural to expect, that, wherever there are most happiness and virtue, and the wisest institutions, there will also be most people” (1985, p. 382). Hume’s essay covers a number of differences between the ancients and the moderns, in manners, morals, and institutions.

Slavery is the first major difference treated in the essay, and while it is but one of them, it exemplifies those differences, which today we might call the rule of law. Hume argues that the waning of slavery across Europe helped to increase the population.

**The chief difference between the *domestic* œconomy of the ancients and that of the moderns consists in the practice of slavery ...** Some passionate admirers of the ancients, and zealous partizans of civil liberty, (for these sentiments, as they are, both of them, in the main, extremely just, are found to be almost inseparable) cannot forbear regretting the loss of this institution; and whilst they brand all submission to the government of a single person with the harsh denomination of slavery, they would gladly reduce the greater part of mankind to real slavery and subjection... The more the master is removed from us in place and rank, the greater liberty we enjoy; the less are our actions inspected and controled; and the fainter that cruel comparison becomes between our own subjection, and the freedom, and even dominion of another. **The remains which are found of domestic slavery, in the AMERICAN colonies, and among some EUROPEAN nations, would never surely create a desire of rendering it more universal. The little humanity,** commonly observed in persons, accustomed, from their infancy, to exercise so great

authority over their fellow-creatures, and to trample upon human nature, were sufficient alone **to disgust us** with that unbounded dominion. Nor can a more probable reason be assigned for **the severe, I might say, barbarous manners** of ancient times, than the practice of domestic slavery; by which every man of rank was **rendered a petty tyrant, and educated amidst the flattery, submission, and low debasement of his slaves**. (pp. 383-384, boldface added)

Hume's excoriation of ancient slavery stretches over many pages, and it seems quite clear that he expects the reader to extend it to slaveholding of contemporary times as well. Writing of porters in Rome who were chained slaves: "Had not these people shaken off *all sense of compassion* towards *that unhappy part of their species*, would they have presented their friends, at the first entrance, with such an image of the severity of the master, and misery of the slave?" (p. 385, italics added). He speaks of ancient trials in which evidence is extorted from slaves, "by the most exquisite torments" (p. 385). He sardonically notes the ancient indifference toward the "instance of cruelty" such as the whipping and lashing of slaves (p. 386). Hume argues that slavery was inconducive to populousness, and makes an analogy to the breeding of cattle—which only happens in countryside, not the urban capital, where slavery was most prevalent—but he apologizes for the analogy, because "The comparison is shocking between the management of human creatures and that of cattle" (p. 387). He then digs in to the greed of slavery, speaking of "the calculations of sordid interest" and "avaricious masters" (p. 388). The cruelty and barbarity of ancient slavery is a reflection of their manners and institutions, so contrary to modern civilization. It is hard to read Hume's excoriation of ancient slavery without seeing modern slavery as its prime target of condemnation.

Yet Hume summarizes, “All I pretend to infer from these reasonings is, that slavery is in general disadvantageous both to the happiness and populousness of mankind, and that its place is much better supplied by the practice of hired servants” (p. 396). Wallace, although no defender of slavery, argued other factors played a more important role in the higher ancient population, such as a higher percentage of farmers, a diminished taste for luxury, and different treatment of those in poverty.

“Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations” and the footnote in “Of National Characters” were first published around the same time. The two essays both dealt with the impact of morals on society. Hume could have put the racist footnote in “Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations;” the issues were very much intertwined at the time. In *The Spirit of Laws*, originally published in English in 1750, Montesquieu compiled a list of satirical reasons for supporting slavery, including: “It is impossible for us to suppose these creatures to be men; because, allowing them to be men, a suspicion would follow, that we ourselves are not Christians” (Montesquieu, 2002, p. 239). To fling a claim of moral equality of blacks and whites at slaveholders and their defenders would be to infuriate them and indeed indict them of heinous inhumanity. Bigotry towards non-whites, and even between whites of different ethnicities, was strongly embedded in the culture by Hume’s time and was a great part of the defense of slavery in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

To assert that blacks were the moral equals of whites and then to advocate enslaving them would have been a nearly impossible rope to walk. Although some tried to make the argument, most on the pro-slavery side argued that the two groups were not equal, and many on the anti-slavery side argued they were.

But what about taking a position that they were not equal and that slavery should be abolished? Were there any benefits in walking *this* line of reasoning? The answer is yes, as, in that era, it could help persuade some readers. Hume was well aware that it is not easy to convince opponents of an argument without conceding to some of their groundwork, and according them some respect. One could speculate that Hume could have seen a concession on race as a necessary evil, helping to push opponents towards an anti-slavery view. On the other hand, if we assume our default position, Hume may have just held both opinions. It would be far less contradictory to believe there are differences between the races and still oppose slavery than to support slavery and believe that all men are created equal.

Indeed, if the arguments on race and slavery were so intertwined, was there an advantage to trying to separate the two issues? Again, the answer is yes. Hume could have seen it as a way to remove some of the violent emotions of the slavery debate. A major theme within Hume's work is that violent passions can overwhelm calm ones. Although a narrow cost-benefit analysis would demonstrate that slaveholders and (non-enslaved) society at large may be worse off utilizing slavery, if the debate is mixed with an emotional element like race, Hume's pro-slavery readers may not be able to take in his other arguments. As empathizing with those of a different race may have been hard for some of Hume's 18<sup>th</sup> century audience, Hume may have seen discussing slavery in a time where many whites were enslaved as well, helpful in encouraging his more racist audience to fully understand its true horrors. Although in this essay Hume mostly shies away from mentioning race, there is an exception. At the end of his section on slavery,

Hume briefly mentions an exchange of slaves, based on their race, in his own time “EGYPT, according to Mons. MAILLET, sends continual colonies of black slaves to the other parts of the TURKISH empire; and receives annually an equal return of white: The one brought from the inland parts of AFRICA; the other from MINGRELIA, CIRCASSIA, and TARTARY” (p. 398). By reminding his readers that although in American and Europe slaves are predominately black, in other parts they are white, he may be trying to further encourage them to conceptualize slavery outside of their feelings on race.

By defusing any suspicion of recrimination and attempting to separate the issue of race from slavery, his arguments in opposition to slavery could have more impact. There is certainly some evidence that Hume’s footnote slightly endeared him to those on the pro-slavery side. As one pro-slavery voice states before citing Hume’s footnote, “In looking into Mr. Hume’s Essays particularly the one of *national characters*...I was made happy to observe the ideas of so ingenious a writer corresponding with my own” (Estwick, 1773, p. 77). We of course do not know if Hume read this statement, or further if he would have received it as a compliment or insult, but it is clear that Hume was read and cited among those with pro-slavery sympathies, despite his opposition to the institution.

If Hume attempted to keep the two arguments separate, his readers and commentators continued to tie them together. James Beattie was perhaps most renowned for his criticism of Hume. In 1770, Beattie published *Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth*. It was largely a criticism of Hume’s metaphysical skepticism, but

he devoted a few pages to treating Hume's footnote on race. In this digression, Beattie first ties Hume's footnote on race to Aristotle's argument for natural slavery. Beattie paraphrases Aristotle as saying, "That men of little genius, and great bodily strength, are by nature destined to serve, and those of better capacity, to command; that the natives of Greece, and of some of other countries, being naturally superior in genius, have natural right to empire; and that the rest of mankind, being naturally stupid, are destined to labour and slavery" (Beattie, 1770, p. 478). After caricaturing Aristotle, Beattie then, ignoring Hume's opposition to slavery entirely, states, "Mr HUME argues nearly in the same manner in regard to the superiority of white men over black" (Beattie, 1770, p.479).

To further emphasize the connection between race and slavery and perhaps rally his Christian readers, in his 1776 revision, Beattie rewrote his last paragraph to state:

The natural inferiority of negroes is a favorite topic with some modern writers. They mean perhaps to invalidate the authority of that BOOK, which declares, that "Eve was the mother of all living," and that "God hath made of one blood all nations of men, for to dwell on all the face of the earth." And perhaps some of them may have it in view to vindicate a certain barbarous piece of policy, which, though it does no honor to the Christian world, and is not, I believe, attended with pecuniary advantage to the commercial, has notwithstanding many patrons even in this age of light and liberty.—But Britons are famous for generosity; a virtue in which it is easy for them to excel both the Romans and the Greeks. Let it never be said that slavery is countenanced by the bravest and most generous people on earth; by a people who are animated with that heroic passion, the love of liberty, beyond all nations ancient or modern. (Quoted from Fieser, 2005, p. 279)

Hume refers to Beattie as a "bigotted silly Fellow" (Hume, 2011a, Vol. 2, p. 301).

There is evidence that Hume did alter some of his work in reaction to Beattie's criticism,

yet it is unlikely Hume's revision of his footnote on race was inspired by it (Garrett, 2000). Nevertheless, Beattie's criticism did receive some attention. In fact, the section of his book that criticized Hume's footnote on race was reprinted in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1771.

Hume's footnote on race gained notice, not just in England but in the United States as well. In 1773, spurred by an anti-slavery pamphlet by Benjamin Rush which was notably championed by Benjamin Franklin, a number of commentaries were published which included references to Hume's footnote on race and which also ignored the division Hume may have been trying to create between race and slavery. In what was likely an indirect response to Hume's footnote, one commenter wrote satirically in the *Pennsylvania Packet*:

SIR,

In looking over the latter part of the first chapter of Genesis, I find an account of God's having granted to Adam and his posterity, not only a dominion over "the fish of the sea, the fowl of the air, cattle, and every thing that *creepeth* upon the earth," but likewise in a particular manner over the negroes of Africa.\*--I beg therefore you would mention this, in your paper, to silence those writers who insist upon the Africans belonging to the same species of men with the white people, and who will not allow that God formed them in common with horses, oxen, dogs, etc. for the benefit of the white people alone, to be used by them either for pleasure or to labour with their *other* beasts in the culture of tobacco, indigo, rice, and sugar.

A  
CUSTOMER

\*"And the beasts of Æthiopia shall bow down to thee, even they whose figure and speech are like unto thine own, and whose heads are covered

with a covering like unto fine wool. They who dwell on the sea coast, shall serve thee, and thy seed after thee, even they who shall sojourn in the Islands afar off, where the sun hath his going down”. (Quoted from Jordan, 1962, pp. 55-56)

The piece was later picked up by papers in Connecticut and Virginia. The author is still unknown. Winthrop Jordan, who rediscovered the writing, notes that the most likely suspect would have been Benjamin Franklin, a friend of Hume’s, as it echoes the satire Franklin used in *Sidi Mehemet Ibrahim on the Slave Trade* (1790), except that as Jordan points out, Franklin was in England at the time of its writing. As this commentary is likely a response to Richard Nisbet’s response to Rush, it is unlikely Franklin could have responded as quickly given the distance.

The authorship may be important, as the author of the above commentary may be the same author of a pamphlet published anonymously eleven days later titled, “Personal Slavery Established.” Although likely understood by most to be a satire at its time of publication, “Personal Slavery Established” has only recently been rediscovered as such by Lester Scherer (1973). For many years, scholars believed it was a pro-slavery document, and it is still sometimes mistaken as one. In fact, when Palter lists the eleven sources he found who referenced Hume’s footnote, well after Scherer’s article, he lists “Personal Slavery Established” as a reference supporting its exoteric message.<sup>6</sup> “Personal

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<sup>6</sup> According to Palter, he found 11 responses to Hume’s footnote on race, and the majority were written in opposition. Opposing Hume’s footnote were: James Beattie (1770), James Ramsay (1784), Charles Crawford (1784), James McHenry (1791), Noah Webster (1793), and Henri Gregoire (1808). According to Palter, in support of Hume’s footnote on race were: Immanuel Kant (1764), Samuel Estwick (1772), Anon (1773), Richard Nisbet (1773), and Edward Long (1774). Moving Anon(1773) into the opposing category we find 7 writings opposing Hume’s footnote’s exoteric message and 4 supporting.

Slavery Established” was a response to Nisbet’s 1773 pamphlet “Slavery Not Forbidden,” in which Hume’s footnote on race is cited in full. Both “Personal Slavery Established” and Nisbet’s pamphlet once again bring together the race and slavery debate.

### c. Contradictions Created by the Footnote

Outside of Hume’s choice to place his footnote on race and arguments against slavery in different essays, there are more enlightening details about his footnote that are worth exploring. In 1753 Hume added the footnote on race to the end of the following paragraph, which remained unchanged with the addition.

If the characters of men depended on the air and climate, the degrees of heat and cold should naturally be expected to have a mighty influence; since nothing has a greater effect on all plants and irrational animals. **And indeed there is some reason to think, that all the nations, which live beyond the polar circles or between the tropics, are inferior to the rest of the species, and are incapable of all the higher attainments of the human mind.** The poverty and misery of the northern inhabitants of the globe, and the indolence of the southern, from their few necessities, may, perhaps, account for this remarkable difference, without our having recourse to physical causes. This however is certain, that the characters of nations are very promiscuous in the temperate climates, and **that almost all the general observations, which have been formed of the more southern or more northern people in these climates, are found to be uncertain and fallacious.** (1985, pp. 207-208, boldface added)

It is interesting to note in the first bold sentence that Hume seems to be talking about all humans being part of a single species, which would directly contradict the first sentence of the original footnote on race where he mentions four or five distinct species. However, there is ambiguity as to whether “species” here is singular or plural. To resolve this, it is

helpful to look at the French translation of this text, which Hume likely had some input on, published soon after the English version. There, “au reste de l’espece humaine” was used in the above paragraph, indicating there is one human species, and “d’autres especes humaines” is in the footnote on race, indicating there are multiple human species (1758, pp. 344-345). Although one could assume this was an oversight or was written in that manner to help the natural flow of the passage, this paragraph is not the only time Hume refers to the human species as one. In fact, in the first paragraph in “Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations,” Hume states:

The arts and sciences, indeed, have flourished in one period, and have decayed in another: But we may observe, that, at the time when they rose to greatest perfection among one people, they were perhaps totally unknown to all the neighbouring nations; and though they universally decayed in one age, yet in a succeeding generation they again revived, and diffused themselves over the world. As far, therefore, as observation reaches, **there is no universal difference discernible in the human species**; and though it were allowed, that the universe, like an animal body, had a natural progress from infancy to old age; yet as it must still be uncertain, whether, at present, it be advancing to its point of perfection, or declining from it, we cannot thence presuppose any decay in human nature. (1985, p. 378, boldface added)

At first, there appears to be the same plural/singular ambiguity regarding the word “species” here, except Hume attached a footnote to the last sentence mentioning Columella’s account of twins having been more common at one point in Egypt and Africa. He suggests Columella may have been mistaken, as that does not appear to be the case today. This footnote is important in that here we can be sure Hume is not just talking about a white species, he is including other races as of the same species. As we see from the revisions appearing in 1777, Hume does revise the sentence in the footnote on race to

exclude the suggestions of multiple human species, but there are certainly other elements of interest in the above passage. Outside of his single species assertion, Hume further notes that there is no difference within the species. This idea collides with his footnote on race. Given that the quotation is stated in the very first paragraph of the “Populousness” essay, it is difficult to claim it wasn’t deliberate. As he was rereading and revising both essays for over 20 years until his death, it would be remarkable if such a contradiction were just an oversight.

Going back to the paragraph to which Hume’s footnote on race was added: In the second emboldened sentence, Hume writes that almost all observations made of people in the northern and southern regions are “uncertain and fallacious.” In the added footnote, he then proceeds to make many broad and absolute comments about non-whites. Hume allows for no exceptions in the first version of the footnote on race. “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” (boldface added). The absolute categorical assertiveness in this part of the footnote was, for many adversaries of Hume, low-hanging fruit to lambast him.

Beattie points out that one cannot state something about all blacks without having met all blacks. He also attacked by giving counterexamples. “The empires of Peru and Mexico could not have been governed, nor the metropolis of the latter built after so singular a manner, in the middle of a lake, without men eminent both for action and speculation. Every body has heard of the magnificence, good government, and ingenuity, of the ancient Peruvians. The Africans and Americans are known to have many ingenious

manufactures and arts among them, which even Europeans would find it no easy matter to imitate” (1770, p. 481).

Even Nisbet, a supporter of slavery who does not counter Hume directly, notes “A few instances may be found, of African negroes possessing virtues and becoming ingenious; but still what I have said, with regard to their general character, I dare say, most people acquainted with them, will agree to” (1773, p. 23). If we take Hume’s footnote on race at face value, it is odd that Hume, someone who continually warns his readers against prejudices and bigotry, and who opposes slavery, goes farther in his assertions than someone with great sympathy towards the institution. Perhaps Nisbet recognized that stating there are no examples of something makes one’s argument brittle and easy to defeat. Nisbet goes on to agree with Hume that there are no developed African civilizations, but concedes there are obvious well-known examples of other, non-white, developed civilizations. As Nisbet’s primary target is blacks, this is not much of a concession (pp. 23-24).

Given that there were, in fact, known examples of developed African civilizations in that time, the anonymous satirist of “Personal Slavery Established” sees Nisbet and Hume’s statement as an opportunity for mockery:

Africa has no kingdoms of any eminence, but chiefly consists of petty monarchies, **excepting Bildulgerid, Ethiopia, Nubia, Abissinia, Morocco, and many others that are rather large**... The stupidity of the natives cannot be attributed to climate; for that role would also effect the Chinese and the West-Indians themselves; and besides, the Moors (who are situated at no great distance from the Slave coasts) have always made a figure in history, and the Egyptians were once eminent for the progress of the arts. **But these are rather instances of the powers of sagacious**

**instinct than a proof of my opinion, respecting the irrationality of *all Africans, being erroneous.*** (1773, pp. 19-20, boldface added)

Yet examples which cast doubt on Hume's assertion are not derived only from external sources. As Palter (1995) notes, Hume's 1742 essay, "The Rise of Arts and Sciences," counters Hume's own writing. "In China, there seems to be a pretty considerable stock of politeness and science" (Hume, 1985, p. 122). Palter supposes the inconsistency is due to Hume's flawed scholarship (1995, pp. 6-7), yet this was not a sentiment Hume later forgot about. When composing an index for the 1758 edition of this essay, Hume pointed to this section with the description, "China, its Excellence and Defects" (1758, p. 532). The "Defects" Hume is referencing in the index are flaws he attributes, in this section, to the government and the fact that only one language was being used in China. There are no references made to race.

Even more contradictory to Hume's footnote on race is his 1752 essay, "Of the Balance of Trade." Hume writes, "The skill and ingenuity of Europe in general surpasses perhaps that of China, with regard to manual arts and manufactures; yet are we never able to trade thither without great disadvantage" (1985, p. 313). The use of the word "perhaps" suggests Hume is well aware of some of the accomplishments the Chinese made in manual arts and manufactures, accomplishments which Hume found comparable to those of Europe. It is also very improbable that Hume had not heard of the accomplishments of some of the Amerindians. As we see from the above passages, they were well known in Hume's time, and they were even extensively discussed at the time of the Valladolid debates.

Regarding blacks, the group that is the primary target of the controversial footnote and who eventually become the only target in the final version, Hume makes note of a prominent exception, mentioning at the end of the footnote a black individual who violates his assumptions, at least to a point. “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.” (The word “very” was stricken in the 1770 edition.)

The individual alluded to was Francis Williams, a renowned scholar and poet who had traveled to England for a few years in the 1720s (Carretta, 2003). He made a favorable impression among many scholars and elites, including those at the Royal Society. As one editor notes in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* in 1771, written after a reprint of Beattie’s criticism of Hume on his footnote:

To the above may be added two instances, that Blacks, if properly educated are capable of the same improvements as Whites. About forty years ago, Mr. Williams, an African of fortune, who dressed like other gentlemen, in a tie-wig, sword, &c. and who was honored with the friendship of Mr. Cheselden, and other members of science, was admitted to the meetings of the Royal Society, and, being proposed as a member, was rejected solely for a reason unworthy of that learned body, viz. on account of his complexion. **The vulgar, indeed, used sometimes to jeer and insult him in the streets; but such philosophers as Mr. Hume, and those of Crane-Court, might have known, that souls are of no colour, and that no one can tell, on viewing a casket, what jewel it contains.** And at this time, the *proceedings of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts*, every year inform us, that the Rev. Mr. Philip Quaque, a Black, who is missionary, catechist, and school-master, to the Negroes on the Gold Coast, is diligent and successful in the duties of his function: And it cannot be supposed, that any English Bishop would have admitted this Gentleman into holy orders, if he had discovered *no symptoms of the ingenuity.*

Let it also be remembered, that, some centuries ago, the Russians were as uncivilized as many Indian nations are now; and that Egypt is at present immersed in sloth and ignorance, tho' formerly it was the repository of learning and knowledge. Such have been, and may be, the revolutions of science, in all parts of the world, without consideration of climate or complexion. (1771, pp. 595-596, boldface added)

Whether Hume read this passage from the magazine is unknown. Also unknown is whether Hume knew of other talented or accomplished blacks besides Francis Williams, such as those mentioned in the passage above. Palter argues Hume may have made the statement on the dearth of talented blacks out of ignorance (1995, p. 7). However, it is unlikely, at least by the time Hume revised his footnote, that he had also not heard of Phillis Wheatley, a poet, who had impressed both Voltaire and Benjamin Franklin, and was invited to the royal court when traveling in England (Robinson, 1965).

Cognizance of Wheatley and others notwithstanding, it is plainly contradictory that Hume would state in the footnote that there are no examples of something, and then name an example of that very thing, even if he lampoons William's talent. Again, doing so could have been a tactic used routinely by Hume to counter absolutist statements. Yet as Hume does not follow up as he does elsewhere by noting a need for moderation or any other statement indicating his self-awareness, we are left to wonder if that is what he is doing.

Look again at the first three sentences of Hume's revised 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 manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences." In the

second sentence Hume has replaced “never” with “scarcely ever” in his 1770 edition, allowing exceptions, yet he does not rephrase the next sentence to allow for a single individual to be an exception. If there are cases of civilized African nations within the continent, as he implies in the revision, it stands to reason there would have to be individuals of genius. Of course, one could fairly argue this may not have been an intentional contradiction. Even someone as eloquent and precise in his language as Hume is allowed to make a few mistakes. Even Homer nods, as the saying goes.

It would also not be unfair to concede that admitting to a few exceptions to the otherwise total absence of black civilized nations is not an acceptance that blacks are capable of creating civilized nations. Hume could have believed those cases to be random luck, happening largely by accident. On the other hand, why certain nations develop and others do not is a topic Hume discusses in great depth in many of his other essays, particularly in “Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Science.” Nowhere in those works does Hume mention race being a factor, despite the fact that he revised many of these essays after writing his footnote on race and could have added sentiments to that effect, had he felt it appropriate or necessary. On the whole, from his writings, Hume argues there are numerous challenges to a group of people in a nation becoming civilized. Civilization itself can also be precarious, and can come and go.

In the last paragraph in his 1752 essay, “Of Commerce,” Hume discusses specifically development in African nations, saying:

We may form a similar remark with regard to the general history of mankind. What is the reason, why no people, living between the tropics, could ever yet attain to any art or civility, or reach even any

police in their government, and any military discipline; while few nations in the temperate climates have been altogether deprived of these advantages? **It is probable that one cause of this phenomenon is the warmth and equality of weather in the torrid zone, which render clothes and houses less requisite for the inhabitants, and thereby remove, in part, that necessity, which is the great spur to industry and invention.** *Curis acuens mortalia corda.* Not to mention, that the fewer goods or possessions of this kind any people enjoy, the fewer quarrels are likely to arise amongst them, and the less necessity will there be for a settled police or regular authority to protect and defend them from foreign enemies, or from each other. (1985, p. 267, boldface added)

Although Sebastiani (2013) notes the similarities between the above passages and Hume's footnote on race, she does not question why race was not added as a factor in Hume's "Of Commerce" as an explanation for a lack of development in African nations. She merely notes, "One reason given in both essays was indolence, linked to the fewer needs and the abundance of natural products in the tropical countries" (p. 41). On the other hand, it is odd Hume doesn't mention race in "Of Commerce," relying instead on a mix of climate-related and the moral causes to explain the lack of development. If Hume thought race was a notable explanation for the lack of "art or civility," why does he steer clear of it in one essay and utilize it in another? Hume certainly does not come across as apprehensive of repeating over and over the importance of moral causes. At the very least, perhaps Hume did not think race was a fundamental driving factor.

Moreover, it is strange that in the concluding paragraph of "Of National Characters," Hume seems to give an additional explanation for the differences observed in hotter climates. After admitting to the possibility that climate can cause northern

populations to have stronger preferences towards alcohol, and southern populations to have stronger preferences towards prurient behavior, Hume states:

I shall conclude this subject with observing, that though the passion for liquor be more brutal and debasing than love, which, when properly managed, is the source of all politeness and refinement; yet this **gives not so great an advantage to the southern climates, as we may be apt, at first sight, to imagine. When love goes beyond a certain pitch, it renders men jealous, and cuts off the free intercourse between the sexes, on which the politeness of a nation will commonly much depend.** And if we would subtilize and refine upon this point, we might observe, that **the people, in very temperate climates, are the most likely to attain all sorts of improvement; their blood not being so inflamed as to render them jealous,** and yet being warm enough to make them set a due value on the charms and endowments of the fair sex. (1985, p. 215, boldface added)

Here Hume is stating that heat beyond a certain level can be more damaging than cold weather because it tends to remove the feminine influence on culture, as more control may be exerted over women, which in turn can lessen the politeness and refinement of a society. In the final sentence of the essay, he implicitly suggests that if the heat were removed, there would be much improvement.

In “Of Polygamy and Divorces,” first published 1742, Hume elaborates further on the negative effects of men’s jealous possessiveness of women, disempowering them and removing them from society. “We are, by nature, their lovers, their friends, their patrons: Would we willingly exchange such endearing appellations, for the barbarous title of master and tyrant?” (p. 184). Referring to polygamous cultures, he notes that this jealousy often diminishes relations among men as well, as visits to each other’s homes

are few and constrained and limited when they do occur. In a paragraph added in 1758, Hume notes the effects of treating women like “slaves”:

The bad education of children, especially children of condition, is another unavoidable consequence of these eastern institutions. **Those who pass the early part of life among slaves, are only qualified to be, themselves, slaves and tyrants; and in every future intercourse, either with their inferiors or superiors, are apt to forget the natural equality of mankind.** What attention, too, can it be supposed a parent, whose seraglio affords him fifty sons, will give to instilling principles of morality or science into a progeny, with whom he himself is scarcely acquainted, and whom he loves with so divided an affection? Barbarism, therefore, appears, from reason as well as experience, to be the inseparable attendant of polygamy. (p. 185, boldface added)

Whether due to high temperatures or polygamous practices, men’s jealous possessiveness of women debases societal practices. Children raised among societies where confinement and repression are prevalent will perpetuate the inequality, creating a pernicious long-term cycle. Here, Hume may be offering a further reason for differences between European and other nations development, as he argues this treatment of women is less common in Europe. What is most noteworthy for our purposes is that here, several years after inserting the blaring sentences about racial inequality, Hume affirms “the natural equality of mankind.”

Of further interest is Hume’s sentence from the footnote on blacks in Europe. “Not to mention our colonies, 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.” Importantly, Hume uses the word “slaves” to describe the blacks in Europe. Yet there

were many free blacks in Europe at the time (Popkin, 1999, p. 512). For Hume, freedom is essential in the development of genius. As he remarks in “Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Science,” “My first observation on this head is, That it is impossible for the arts and sciences to arise, at first, among any people unless that people enjoy the blessing of a free government” (1985, p.115). He continues:

A people, governed [by arbitrary power], are slaves in the full and proper sense of the word; and it is impossible they can ever aspire to any refinements of taste or reason...An unlimited despotism of this nature, while it exists, effectually puts a stop to all improvements, and keeps men from attaining that knowledge, which is requisite to instruct them in the advantages, arising from a better police, and more moderate authority....The *first* growth, therefore, of the arts and sciences can never be expected in despotic governments. (pp. 116-118)

Even if, strangely, Hume happened not to notice how problematic it was to argue that slaves in Europe have not shown genius, his critics did. As Beattie notes, “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, who has not a single friend on earth, but is universally considered and treated as if he were of a species inferior to the human;--that such a creature should so distinguish himself among Europeans, as to be talked of through the world for a man of genius, is surely no reasonable expectation” (1770, p. 482).

Hume could have very well understood that slavery diminishes genius and still not grasped why black slaves throughout Europe appeared to him not to show genius. It is curious, nevertheless, that he added the word “slave” to describe the blacks in Europe, and yet his potential exception, Francis Williams, had been born free. Williams is said to have been given a “proper education” as an experiment by the Duke of Montagu, to see if

“a Negroe might not be found as capable of literature as a white person” (Long, 1773, p. 476).<sup>7</sup> It appears that he did in fact surpass many equally educated whites of his time, proving the Duke’s experiment a success and providing a great counter to any skeptics. As Suman Seth (2014) observes, “Williams’s case would seem, on its face, to refute the claim that the difference in intellectual capacity between whites and blacks was due to race, rather than upbringing” (p. 769).

To add more complication to Hume’s statement against black slaves in Europe, in his “Of National Characters” essay, in the same edition where he added his footnote on race, Hume added another footnote which mitigated a racist statement he had made towards Jews. In the original edition of his essay, while discussing minority cultures, Hume states, “the JEWS in EUROPE, and the ARMENIANS in the east, have a peculiar character; and the former are as much noted for fraud, as the latter for probity” (1985, p. 205). In 1753, Hume added to this sentence a footnote describing, what in modern parlance might be called, the systematic negative effects of racism. “A small sect or society amidst a greater are commonly most regular in their morals; because they are more remarked, and the faults of individuals draw dishonour on the whole. The only exception to this rule is, when the superstition and prejudices of the large society are so strong as to throw an infamy on the smaller society, independent of their morals. For in that case, having no character either to save or gain, they become careless of their behaviour, except among themselves” (p. 205). Whether based on some truth or pure

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<sup>7</sup> Records on Francis Williams are very sparse. Unfortunately, the best source on him is from Edward Long who was known for his strong racial bias.

fiction, the negative stereotypes of a minority can be so strongly believed by the majority that the targeted minority becomes resigned to accepting them, seeing themselves as having nothing left to lose.

Interestingly, in the 1770 edition of Hume's essay, some of his footnotes are moved to endnotes and remain in this format in the final 1777 edition. The above footnote about Jewish minorities becomes endnote [L] and is placed right before Hume's footnote on race, which becomes endnote [M]. Ironically, despite the footnotes' new proximity to each other, Hume may well have not noticed the relationship the two held. He very well could have understood the negative effects of racism towards Jews but not realized how it would likewise affect blacks. On the other hand, maybe it was intentional, with Hume purposefully contrasting the two opinions, or hinting towards some degree of esotericism in the racist footnote.

#### **d. Parrots as Satirical Devices**

If one wanted to venture further into speculative - albeit rather dubious - territory with Hume's footnote on race, they may study Hume's comparison of Williams' accomplishments to a parrot who can speak a few words plainly. Most likely this is meant to be derogatory towards Williams, an attempt to diminish and trivialize his accomplishments. Yet there is reason to believe that at the time that Hume added the footnote, the parrot was quite well known as a symbol of irony and human hypocrisy.

Thomas DiPiero (2009) studied the use of parrots in literature, particularly focusing on Voltaire. A few years prior to Hume adding his footnote, Voltaire used a parrot as a symbol for a bringer of truth and a predictor of the future in *Zadig, or the Book of Fate* (1747). DiPiero notes that the protagonist, Zadig, wonders something aloud: “Zadig is stupefied when the parrot interjects, ‘Of course’” (2009, p. 351). The parrot interjects a few words plainly. DiPiero notes that Bruce Thomas Boehrer, “traces the captivation with parrots’ often ironic pronouncements back to Pliny the Elder” (2009, p. 341 fn. 1).

DiPiero also discusses *Ver-Vert*, a sensational and quickly circulated poem about a parrot, named Ver-Vert, a name that might suggest *vérité* (truth), besides the color green. The poem was published in France in 1734. The author of the poem was Jean-Baptiste-Louis Gresset (1709-1777), was a young Jesuit, and poem led him to leave the order. The Encyclopedia Britannica (2020) describes Gresset: “French poet and dramatist who received immediate and lasting acclaim for his irreverently comic narrative poem *Ver-Vert* (1734; *Ver-Vert, or the Nunnery Parrot*).”

Gresset was located at the Jesuit college in La Flèche, which is where Hume spent several years complete his draft of the *Treatise*, and often using the library at the Jesuit college. In his biography of Hume, Ernest Mossner writes of the two men quite possibly having met:

At La Flèche, Gresset’s story could hardly have failed to reach the ears of the twenty-four year old Scottish visitor, and it is pleasant to imagine that the two young men of such different talents may have met and exchanged badinage. In 1752, in his capacity of Keeper of the Advocates’ Library in Edinburgh, Hume ordered two items signaling his youthful residence at La Flèche and at Rheims,

Gresset's collected works and Pouilly's *Théorie des sentiments agréables*. (1954, p. 102)

Thus, one year prior to the addition of the infamous footnote, Hume ordered Gresset's complete works. Hume certainly knew of Gresset's famous parrot, even if he had not met Gresset in person.

In the poem, *Ver-Vert*'s discourse goes from pious and devout to bawdy and carnal, and back to pious and devout, but the now-worldly parrot dies once his discourse regains the favor of nuns. One of the things that the poem seems to suggest is that human discourse is often little more than the banter of parrots. It is unsurprising that Gresset departed the Jesuit order after the poem appeared.

DiPiero writes:

By the eighteenth century talking parrots had allowed philosophers and naturalists to interrogate the place of the human in existing taxonomies, and they also symbolized the complex metaphors and analogies we use to understand both our world and how we depict it. Voltaire's parrot—and Buffon's, and La Mettrie's—figured the absent or impossible place where the certainty of indexical representation intersected with the abstractions that constitute our modes of knowledge. (2009, p. 362)

Hume would have been well aware of the works DiPiero lists prior to writing his footnote and it is very possible the parrot was signaling satirical intent.

Further, a parrot can be seen as a counterexample to a claim Aristotle made prior to his explanation of a natural slave. "For, as we assert, nature does nothing in vain; and man alone among the animals has speech...But speech serves to reveal the advantageous and the harmful, and hence also the just and the unjust" (Pol. 1.2 1253a9-15).

## V. Conclusion

It is hard to determine whether Hume actually noticed these contradictions in his works or whether his writings were made inconsistent by design. If we wanted to speculate that Hume did not really consider the white race to be categorically more capable than non-white races, or even just the black race for that matter—a generous assumption and perhaps more theoretical than reality—we must theorize why he added his footnote on race.

Perhaps it was a failed attempt at satire. Satire, as we have seen, was not uncommon during his time in regards to race and slavery. One could argue this possibility is less likely as Hume received enough criticism for his writings that one may think he would have wanted to set the record straight at some point after realizing that a good number of his audience was missing his point. Yet not all authors, even today, care if all of their wit is fully understood. The definition of satire has evolved since Hume's time. Ambrose Bierce (1911) denotes this change, defining satire as "An obsolete kind of literary composition in which the vices and follies of the author's enemies were expounded with imperfect tenderness. In this country [America] satire never had more than a sickly and uncertain existence, for the soul of it is wit, wherein we are dolefully deficient, the humor that we mistake for it, like all humor, being tolerant and sympathetic" (pp. 303-304).<sup>8</sup> There may be much lost in translation as we try today to decipher Hume's apparent 'tolerant and sympathetic' attitude toward his target.

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<sup>8</sup> Also see 'Satire: Search Online Etymology Dictionary', <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=satire>.

Alternatively, one could speculate Hume could have been trying to build a strawman argument, one that pro-slavery readers like Nisbet would latch on to but which could easily be disproven with just one example to the contrary, in a sense baiting slavery's defenders. Yet another option is that it was a lampoon, such that the bigot enters the trap, but the delayed awareness of contradiction then makes us realize that it is the bigot who is being laughed at. Samuel Johnson (1755) defines lampoon as "A personal satire; abuse; censure written not to reform but to vex".<sup>9</sup> This type of writing as well, would be difficult for a modern reader to grasp.

The most likely possibility, if one were to assume Hume wrote the footnote in opposition to his actual convictions, was that he wanted to defuse opposition to his pro-slavery readers' opinions, so they would at least partially agree with him, opening the door up for further exchange. Inspiring conversation between groups was a component Hume felt was important in developing a moral nation. It could prove more enduring to have a person reach a conclusion through debate than to tell him the correct conclusion to begin with, especially if joined to a recrimination. If one were to believe this scenario, it could be supposed that he left some contradictions in his work to give readers room to reflect on the reasoning offered throughout his writings, and lead some to suspect there may be some political esotericism or even pedagogical esotericism at play. Or, if one went even further, Hume may have been trying to write in a way that makes some readers

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<sup>9</sup> Also see 'Lampoon: Search Online Etymology Dictionary', <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=lampoon>.

see dramatic contrasts with his other writing, creating a third group of readers who read it satirically.

Even if Hume did make an apparent racist statement which he did not himself find true only to try to persuade pro-slavery or racist readers, it does not mean there was no cost to his statement. The use of political esotericism can be dangerous. One could defend this tactic by saying that it was important to focus on the slavery issue first to open stubborn minds up to change, and the costs in this case outweighed the benefits, and yet there was real harm created by the statement in its influence on generations to come. There are often negative costs to signaling something one does not believe, and regardless of any potential benefits, Hume still bears the responsibility for any discrimination or bigoted thought he appeared to condone with his footnote.

This essay is meant to look at some of the contradictions this footnote created within Hume's work. Although some authors try to argue that racism is endemic in his philosophy, the truth is that much of his writing argues against racist bigotry, which is precisely why this footnote creates such a puzzle. Whether Hume intended his reader to take his footnote at face value or whether he wrote it with other intentions, such to try to manipulate a political response or to lampoon racial bigots, may be impossible to determine with certainty. We can say with confidence however that Hume's footnote on race and his writings that reflect the opposite sentiment cannot both depict what Hume believed. It is possible his true beliefs lay somewhere in between.

## APPENDIX: HUME ACKNOWLEDGING, ENDORSING, OR PRACTICING ESOTERICISM

This Appendix list additional examples in David Hume’s writings in which he acknowledges, endorses, or is practicing esotericism.<sup>10</sup> All boldface font has been added by me.

### Anonymous review

In *The Critical Review* in 1759, Hume anonymously wrote the following, as part of a review, of his good friend Adam Smith’s recently published *Theory of Moral Sentiments*:

Our author subjoins many irrefragable arguments, by which he refutes the sentiments of Mr. Hume, who founded a great part of his moral system on the consideration of public utility. The compass to which we are confined, will not allow us to explain them at full length; but the reader, who will consult **the author** himself, will find, that philosophy scarce affords any thing more undeniable and conclusive. (1759, p. 394)

According to Erik Matson, Colin Doran, and Daniel Klein (2016), “the author”, emphasized above, may have two different meanings: the exoteric meaning—Adam Smith—and the esoteric meaning—David Hume (pp. 3-4).

### Correspondence

In a 1737 Hume write to Henry Home:

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<sup>10</sup> Some of these examples, as well as many other examples of other writers using esotericism, were found in Arthur Melzer’s Appendix: A Chronological Compilation of Testimonial Evidence for Esotericism.

Having a frank letter, I was resolved to make use of it; and accordingly inclose some *Reasonings concerning Miracles*, which I once thought of publishing with the rest, but which **I am afraid will give too much offence, even as the world is disposed at present**. There is something in the turn of thought, and a good deal in the turn of expression, which will not perhaps appear so proper, for want of knowing the context: but the force of the argument you'll be judge of, as it stands. Tell me your thoughts of it. Is not the style too diffuse? though, as that was a popular argument, I have spread it out much more than the other parts of the work. **I beg of you to show it to nobody**, except to Mr Hamilton, if he pleases; and let me know at your leisure that you have received it, read it, **and burnt it**. Your thoughts and mine agree with respect to Dr Butler, and I would be glad to be introduced to him. **I am at present castrating my work, that is, cutting off its nobler parts; that is, endeavouring it shall give as little offence as possible**, before which, I could not pretend to put it into the Doctor's hands. This is a **piece of cowardice**, for which I blame myself, **though I believe none of my friends will blame me. But I was resolved not to be an enthusiast in philosophy, while I was blaming other enthusiasms**. (2011a, Vol. 1, pp. 24-25)

In a 1740 letter to Francis Hutcheson Hume states:

I assure you, that without running any of the heights of Skepticism, I am apt, in a cool hour, to suspect, in general, that **most of my Reasonings will be more useful by furnishing Hints & exciting People's Curiosity** than as containing any Principles that will augment the Stock of Knowledge that must pass to future Ages. (2011a, Vol. 1, p. 39)

In a 1759 letter, joking to Adam Smith and prior to Hume informing Smith of the wide and popular success of his book, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Hume states:

A wise man's Kingdom is his own Breast: Or, if he ever looks farther, **it will only be to the Judgement of a select few, who are free from Prejudices, & capable of examining his Work. Nothing indeed can be a stronger Presumption of Falshood than the Approbation of the Multitude; and Phocion, you know, always suspected himself of some Blunder, when he was attended with the Applauses of the Populace**. (2011b, p. 53)

In a 1764 letter to Col. James Edmonstoune, Hume gives advice on the best career path of a young clergyman and man of letters:

Let this be a new Motive for Mr Vivian to adhere to the ecclesiastical Profession, in which he may have so good a Patron: For civil Employments for Men of Letters are scarcely to be found: All is occupyd by Men of Business, or by Parliamentary Interest.

**It is putting too great a Respect on the Vulgar, and on their Superstitions, to pique one's self on Sincerity with regard to them. Did ever one make it a point of Honour to speak Truth to Children or Madmen? If the thing were worth being treated gravely, I should tell him, that the Pythian Oracle, with the approbation of Xenophon, advisd every one to worship the Gods [of his own city]. I wish it were still in my Power to be a Hypocrite in this particular: The common Duties of Society usually require it; and the ecclesiastical Profession only adds a little more to an innocent Dissimulation or rather Simulation, without which it is impossible to pass thro the World. Am I a Lyar, because I order my Servant to say I am not at home, when I do not desire to see company.** (2011b, pp. 82-83)

### **Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals**

And though the philosophical truth of any proposition by no means depends on its tendency to promote the interests of society; **yet a man has but a bad grace, who delivers a theory, however true, which, he must confess, leads to a practice dangerous and pernicious. Why rake into those corners of nature which spread a nuisance all around? Why dig up the pestilence from the pit in which it is buried? The ingenuity of your researches may be admired, but your systems will be detested; and mankind will agree, if they cannot refute them, to sink them, at least, in eternal silence and oblivion. Truths which are pernicious to society, if any such there be, will yield to errors which are salutary and advantageous** (pp. 257-58).

### **History of England, Volume III**

The favourers of the ancient religion maintained, on the other hand, that the pretence of making the people see with their own eyes, was a mere cheat, and was itself a very gross artifice, by which the new preachers hoped to obtain the guidance of them, and to seduce them from those pastors, whom the laws, whom ancient establishments, whom heaven itself had appointed for their spiritual direction: That the people were, by their ignorance, their stupidity, their necessary avocations, totally unqualified to chuse their own principles; and **it was a mockery to set materials before them, of which they could not possibly make any proper use:** That

even in the affairs of common life, and in their temporal concerns, which lay more within the compass of human reason, the laws had, in a great measure, deprived them of the right of private judgment, and **had, happily for their own and the public interest, regulated their conduct and behaviour:** That theological questions were placed far beyond the sphere of vulgar comprehensions; and ecclesiastics themselves, though assisted by all the advantages of education, erudition, and an assiduous study of the science, could not be fully assured of a just decision; except by the promise made them in scripture, that God would be ever present with his church, and that the gates of hell should not prevail against her: That the gross errors, adopted by the wisest heathens, proved how unfit men were to grope their own way, through this profound darkness; nor would **the scriptures, if trusted to every man's judgment, be able to remedy; on the contrary, they would much augment, those fatal illusions:** That sacred writ itself was involved in so much obscurity, gave rise to so many difficulties, contained so many appearing contradictions, that **it was the most dangerous weapon, that could be entrusted into the hands of the ignorant and giddy multitude:** That the poetical style, in which a great part of it was composed, at the same time that it occasioned uncertainty in the sense, by its multiplied tropes and figures, was **sufficient to kindle the zeal of fanaticism, and thereby throw civil society into the most furious combustion:** That a thousand sects must arise, which would pretend, each of them, to derive its tenets from the scripture; and would be able, by specious arguments, or even without specious arguments, to seduce silly women and ignorant mechanics, into a belief of the most monstrous principles: And that if ever this disorder, dangerous to the magistrate himself, received a remedy, it must be from the tacit acquiescence of the people in some new authority; and it was evidently better, without farther contest or enquiry, to adhere peaceably to ancient, and therefore the more secure, establishments. (pp. 231-232)

If any exception can be admitted to this maxim of toleration, it will only be where a theology altogether new, nowise connected with the ancient religion of the state, is imported from foreign countries, and may easily, at one blow, be eradicated, without leaving the seeds of future innovation. But as this exception would imply some apology for the ancient pagan persecutions, or for the extirpation of Christianity in China and Japan; **it ought surely, on account of this detested consequence, to be rather buried in eternal silence and oblivion.** (p. 433)

## **History of England, Volume V**

Government is instituted, in order to restrain the fury and injustice of the people; and being always founded on opinion, not on force, **it is**

**dangerous to weaken, by these speculations, the reverence, which the multitude owe to authority**, and to instruct them beforehand, that the case can ever happen, when they may be freed from their duty of allegiance. Or should it be found impossible to restrain the licence of human disquisitions, it must be acknowledged, that **the doctrine of obedience ought alone to be inculcated, and that the exceptions, which are rare, ought seldom or never to be mentioned in popular reasonings and discourses.** (p. 544)

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## **BIOGRAPHY**

Kendra Asher graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Economics, History, and International Studies from the University of Wisconsin—Madison in 2006. She received her Masters of Arts in Arabic and Islamic Civilization from the American University in Cairo in 2010. She currently resides in Virginia with her husband, Jacob, and two children, Henry and Mirabelle.