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ARTICLE

James Africanus Beale Horton's philosophy of history: progress, race, and the fate of Africa

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ABSTRACT

Many Victorian philosophers of history attempted to explain what they took to be the evident divergence in the level of civilizational achievement that was attained by different peoples. One prominent paradigm for explaining this divergence was the biological-racialist paradigm. According to this paradigm, endorsed by the likes of Robert Knox, Samuel George Morton, Carl Vogt, and James Hunt, what explains divergence is racial difference. In this paper, I show how one African philosopher, James Africanus Beale Horton, sought to undermine this paradigm and to offer an alternative explanatory paradigm. I argue that Horton presents an alternative paradigm which does not deny that there are divergences that must be explained and which seeks to explain such divergences by appealing to factors such as environmental changes, cultural contact with other societies (and the severing of such contacts), and failures of social organization due to decadence after a period of high civilizational achievement in a given society. Horton presented an alternative philosophy of history which does not give up on the concept of progress, but which also does not condone colonialism and imperialism.

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1. Introduction

By the time of the Crystal Palace Exhibition in 1851, Victorians who were middle-aged would have experienced massive changes. They would have been aware that a kind of rupture had occurred with the past, especially with respect to developments like the railway boom of the 1840s (Crump, *The Age of Steam*, 147–85). Additionally, the circulation of travel reports which indicated that in other societies such radical transformations had not occurred, would have given rise to feelings of superiority, as well as attempts to understand the cause of this divergence (Stocking Jr., *Victorian*

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Anthropology, 3–4). This feeling of superiority, based on divergence, was especially salient in the attitude that Europeans held towards Africans. One way to explain this divergence was to posit the existence of fundamental biological differences between different peoples which led to differences in cognitive capacities and thus differences in their level of civilizational attainment. Hence, the Victorian age witnessed the efflorescence of racialist and indeed racist philosophies of history grounded in claims of ineluctable anatomical differences. This is not surprising since it was during the nineteenth century that race science came into its own in countries such as Britain, France, India (under the British Raj), and the United States (Curtin, *The Image of Africa*, 363–87; Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science*, 83–110; Bernasconi "A Haitian in Paris"; Bolt, *Victorian Attitudes to Race*; Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*; Trautmann, *Aryans and British India*, 165–89; Russett, *Sexual Science*, 49–77). However, these racialist (and racist) philosophies of history did not go unchallenged by Africans. One African who challenged these philosophies of history and the race science upon which they were based was James Africanus Beale Horton. Horton in his *West African Countries and Peoples* responded directly to Robert Knox, Samuel George Morton, Carl Vogt, and James Hunt.[1]

Horton was born in 1835 in the British colony of Sierra Leonne. Horton was taught classics and mathematics at the Grammar School of the Church Missionary Society. In 1853 the British government moved to recruit Africans from Sierra Leone to the army's medical service as a response to fears that European medical officers were dying at an unsustainable rate in the British colonies in West Africa. By 1855, three African students, including Horton, were selected to study medicine in Britain. Horton studied at King's College London and Edinburgh University (Fyfe, *Africanus Horton, 1835–1883*, 23–30). Horton earned his M.D. in 1859 by writing a thesis on *The Medical Topography of the West Coast of Africa*. Horton went on to serve as an officer in the British Army Medical Corps and spent his life in different stations in West Africa. Horton wrote several medical texts, including *Physical and Medical Climate and Meteorology of the West Coast of Africa* (1867), *Guinea Worm, or Dracunculus* (1868), and *The Diseases of Tropical Countries and their Treatment* (1874, 1879). However, from the standpoint of the history of African philosophy his two most important books are *West African Countries and Peoples* (1868) and *Letters on the Political Condition of the Gold Coast* (1870).

The secondary literature on Horton has focused on the manner in which Horton deployed his knowledge of anatomy in order to argue against race

[1]However, the focus of this paper will be on Horton's response to Knox and Morton since Vogt and Hunt were not particularly interested in sketching out historical explanations. Rather they were more squarely focused on anatomical claims. Furthermore, I have reconstructed Horton's critique of Vogt and Hunt in another paper (El Nabolsy, "James Africanus Beale Horton").

science in Part I of his *West African Countries and Peoples* (Sonderegger, "J. African Beale Horton"; Graf, "James Africanus Beale Horton"; Táíwò, "Excluded Moderns"). This is not surprising insofar as Horton was one of the earliest African critics of the writings of Knox, Morton, Vogt, and Hunt on race science. Moreover, Horton in Parts II and III of his *West African Countries and Peoples* laid out prospective constitutions for Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast, Lagos, and Igboland. Horton defended African self-governance and he championed the idea of a constitutional monarchy with a king elected by universal suffrage (*West African Countries and Peoples*, 97). A substantial secondary literature on Horton's political philosophy has developed (Fyfe, "Africanus Horton as a Constitution-Maker"; Táíwò, *How Colonialism Preempted Modernity*, 98–128; Táíwò, *Rewriting the History of Modern Philosophy*, 23–8; Sonderegger, "Revolutionäres 1868?"; van Hensbroek, "Some Nineteenth-Century African Political Thinkers"; van Hensbroek, *African Political Philosophy, 1860–1995*, 35–49; July, *The Origins of African Modern Thought*, 110–29). However, Horton's philosophy of history has been neglected. This is especially problematic because Horton's political philosophy cannot be fully accounted for without taking into consideration his philosophy of history and his anti-racialist explanation for divergence.

Moreover, as I will attempt to show below, Horton's philosophy of history shows us how it is possible to sever the concept of progress from racism and colonialism. This is important because some scholars have taken it for granted that any endorsement of the concept of progress involves a capitulation to colonialism and its ideological justifications (Ayandele, "James Africanus Beale Horton"; Daaku, "A Pioneer"). Horton's philosophy of history is of special interest because, in Horton's hands, the concept of progress was not only de-associated from racism and colonialism; it was indeed turned against them. Horton's work thus has something to contribute to contemporary debates about decolonization and the question of whether jettisoning the concept of progress is a case of throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

Horton, as a Victorian African, does not deny that there are 'civilized' and 'uncivilized' peoples, but he denies that one can come up with racial explanations of this fact. Instead, one must turn to history and comparative ethnology. Horton was thus aware that, in addition to refuting the racialist explanatory paradigm in philosophy of history, one must also come up with a different explanatory paradigm that can serve as the basis of an alternative research programme that aims at explaining divergence between different peoples.

In this paper, I show how Horton attempted to explain what he took to be different levels of civilizational attainment amongst different peoples without resorting to explanations that draw on race science. This is in fact one of the central questions that Horton seeks to answer: can one come up with non-racist explanations of differences in the levels of civilizational attainment at

a specific point in human history (for Horton that point is the mid-nineteenth century)? The second problem that Horton is confronted with is the thesis that Africans have had no history of civilizational progress. Knox, for example, claimed that Africans have never achieved any form of civilization. Even earlier than Knox, Hegel had denied any sort of historical movement towards progress on the African continent. Hegel had described Africa as not being a "*geschichtlicher Weltteil* [historical part of the world]" and as lacking "*Bewegung und Entwicklung* [motion and development]" (*Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, 129). Horton draws on the relevant historical evidence to show that this thesis is false. In the first instance, he draws on ancient sources to show that Africans played an important role in the development of the classical civilizations of the ancient Mediterranean. In this respect, Horton was defending the ancient model of transmission which, according to Martin Bernal, the Greeks themselves held (Bernal, "Black Athena", 47–63). This model, which emphasized intellectual interactions and borrowings between the ancient Greeks and the ancient Egyptians was widely held among European intellectuals up to the end of the eighteenth century. For example, the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and d'Alembert contains an entry entitled "philosophie des Egyptiens" authored by Diderot. Diderot talks of "Plato, Pythagoras, Democritus, and Thales; all the Greek Philosophers, in short" as being disciples of the Egyptian priests (Diderot, "Egyptian Philosophy", 434–8). However, this model was increasingly subjected to revision and attacks at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century by Kantian historians, and later by Hegel, who were in search of an autochthonous origin for Greek philosophy (Park, *Africa, Asia, and the History of Philosophy*, 69–132). There were some defenders of what Bernal calls the "ancient model" (Bernal, "Black Athena", 47 - 63) in the nineteenth century and Horton was one of them. Horton was not alone in defending the ancient model. In fact, Harriett Martineau described Plato's visit to Egypt as "one of the most important events which have occurred in the history of the human mind" (*Eastern Life*, 12). Yet the idea that there could be any serious intellectual connection between ancient Egypt (understood as an African society) and ancient Greece was subjected to sustained attack from the 1840s onwards as we will see below. These attacks took the form of either upholding Egypt's 'Africanness' but denying any serious intellectual traffic between Egypt and Greece, or maintaining the cultural contact thesis but denying that Egypt was an African society in any important sense.

Horton's re-engagement with classical sources also allows him to respond to a third challenge which concerns him, namely the thesis which was propagated by Knox that racial antipathy was a purely natural phenomenon that has no history. Horton, by contrast, will argue for the thesis that racism has a specific history and that it is a contingent development in human history.

The main thrust of this paper is to argue that Horton shows how a philosophy of history that centres around progress can be severed from biological racism. Thus, the case of Horton, aside from enriching our understanding of modernist African philosophies of history as well as European philosophies of history in the nineteenth century, also allows us to rethink some of the claims that have been made about the relationship between philosophies of history that centre progress on the one hand and racism on the other hand.

2. Progress and the comparative method in the philosophy of history

Horton in Chapter I of *West African Countries and Peoples* makes it clear that he thinks that human history should be understood in terms of progress. The *ur*-state of humanity was a state of helplessness and not bliss. This is a thoroughly secularized conception of history insofar as it explicitly rejects the idea of a Fall and expulsion from a state of innocent bliss. Horton draws on classical literary texts to illustrate his point: "of this primitive state or mythic epoch but little is furnished us in history, and very little is actually known; but from analogical references we are led to believe the speculative traditions of the ancient Romans, that 'mankind, as the state of political community now exists, advance from a rude and helpless state to the formation of political society;' and entirely disapprove of the Greek mythological legend, that 'mankind emerge from a state of innocence and bliss'" (1). The classical sources that he is citing here include Lucian, Hesiod, and Ovid. Horton's use of classical sources, aside from displaying his own erudition, also signals to his readers that racial (and racist) attempts at explaining differences between human societies are not obvious or 'natural'. By drawing on ancient Greek and Roman accounts of human nature and human differences he is thus historicizing the discourse of the Anthropological Society of London (whose members, under the leadership of James Hunt, were extensively involved in articulating and defending a racialist philosophy of history, based on a programme first elaborated by Robert Knox). Horton is also demonstrating that white Europeans do not have any monopoly on the use of classical authorities (Goff, "Your Secret Language", 65–98).

The second element to note is Horton's reference to 'analogical references'. Here Horton is referring to the comparative ethnological approach which sought to use 'primitive peoples' in order to understand how the ancestors of 'civilized peoples' lived. The key assumption of the comparative method was stated clearly by the Scottish anthropologist John F. McLennan: "What is now true in varying degrees of all the rudest races may be assumed to have been true of all the earliest groups" (*Primitive* Marriage, 166). This method essentially aims to answer questions about how the pre-historical distant ancestors of Europeans lived by observing how contemporary

'savages' live. The assumption being that the latter have essentially ceased to develop. This method was also at the foundation of Edward Brunett Tylor's *Primitive Culture* which served as a paradigm for anthropology in the late nineteenth century. Tylor explicitly held that "savage races" provide a window into "primeval culture" (Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 284). The portrayal of 'savages' in this method radiated beyond anthropology and permeated Victorian literature more generally (Johnson, "Victorian Anthroplogy").

The assumptions made by proponents of this method can be summarized as follows: 1. We need empirical data about how the primeval ancestors of modern Europeans lived 2. We cannot directly observe the primeval ancestors of modern Europeans 3. We need a sufficiently similar case from which to draw analogies 4. There are people living today (i.e. in the mid-nineteenth century) who are in the same condition that the primeval ancestors of modern Europeans were in. We can see how this method requires that there be 'savages' without any history of progress. Moreover, we can see how coupled with the idea that African peoples play the role of 'savages' in this analogy, this method was tethered to racist discourse. In fact, this method requires that there be 'savages' without history and without a history of progress in particular, otherwise it cannot get off the ground (i.e. there would be no analogical cases).

Horton is critical of this method and his criticisms anticipate some of the criticisms that came to be levelled against this method towards the end of the nineteenth century and over the course of the twentieth century. Horton does not deny that the ethnographic evidence that was collected by the middle of the nineteenth century seems to indicate that some peoples do not possess state institutions, systems of writing, large urban centres, and so on, such that compared to other peoples they can be said to be 'primitive' or 'savage'. However, Horton denies that from this condition we can legitimately infer that these peoples are without a history of progress. Here, Horton is much more careful than most nineteenth-century evolutionists who simply assume that we can jump from the claim that a given people present us with the properties of a 'primitive' people, to the claim that they have always been in this 'primitive' condition. Horton does not assume that if a given people present us with the properties associated with being a people without 'civilization', then they have always been in this condition. It may very well be that they were 'civilized' at some point in time but have ceased to be so due to geographical or other factors: "in the examination of the world's history, we are led forcibly to entertain the opinion that human affairs possess a gradual and progressive tendency to deterioration. Nations rise and fall; the once flourishing and civilized degenerate into a semi-barbarous state; and those who have lived in utter barbarism, after a lapse of time become the standing nation" (Horton, *West African Countries and Peoples*, 67). What Horton is pointing out is that if the comparative

ethnological method is based on the assumption that 'primitive peoples' who are temporally coeval with 'civilized peoples' can provide insights about how the ancestors of the latter lived, then it is not clear how reliable this method is. For one can think of scenarios where a given 'primitive people' were once 'civilized' but have fallen into a 'semi-barbarous state'. In other words, their present condition would not in fact reveal the original state of humanity. In fact, Horton himself seems to rule out the possibility of a total reversion to an entirely 'primitive state'. Hence, he speaks of a reversion to a 'semi-barbarous state'. If no total reversion to an entirely 'primitive state' is possible and assuming that all peoples have had some history of progress (whatever its extent), then in principle there cannot be any people who are in a condition of pristine 'primitiveness', if that is the case, then African peoples (and of course, all other peoples such as Micronesians and Mesoamericans) cannot be categorized as 'primitive savages'.

Horton's gesture at 'analogical references' in the passage which is cited in the beginning of this section should not be seen as an adoption of the standard comparative method of the Victorian evolutionists. In fact, as I have argued above, Horton showed that this standard method has serious structural flaws in it. Horton's critique predates Franz Boas' critique of evolutionist anthropology ("The Limits of the Comparative Method of Anthropology", 904). It also predates the so-called "re-discovery of history" in anthropology by about a century (Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History*, xx). The point is not to enter into priority disputes, but rather to note that lack of attention to the history of African philosophy (and specifically in this case the history of modern African philosophy of history) in the nineteenth century can distort our understanding of the history of challenges to evolutionism and the comparative method. This also allows us to avoid writing intellectual history in a manner that makes it seem that it has the structure of Europeans making claims about, in this case, Africans, and then coming to revise these claims, without any kind of response from African intellectuals to the claims that were made about them. It is true that Horton does not entirely abandon comparison, but he compares peoples who are within historical time, i.e. there are no comparisons with peoples who are outside history or who are perpetually stuck at the starting point, or who lack any history of progress.

On Horton's view, setbacks which involve a temporary regression occur frequently: "after a short period of civil, of military, and of literary glory, the prospect has changed at once; the career of degeneracy has begun and has proceeded till it could advance no further; or some unforeseen calamity has occurred, which has obliterated for a time all memory of former improvements" (*West African Countries and Peoples*, 68). Yet, note that for Horton this regression is temporary, hence he speaks of an obliteration of all memory of former improvements, but only 'for a time'. Temporary regression does occur but only within the framework of a macro-scale trend towards progress. For

Horton, progress is the common fate of humanity, it is not exclusive to any group. Thus, the concept of progress is severed from its association with racist discourse grounded in race science.

Once a given nation or people has entered a state of decline relative to their previous achievements this does not foreclose the possibility that they can re-attain their former glories. Horton, speaking of Africans, notes that, in the past, Africans attained tremendous civilizational achievements: ''pilgrimages were made to Africa in search of knowledge by such eminent men as Solon, Plato, Pythagoras; and several came to listen to the instructions of the African Euclid, who was at the head of the most celebrated mathematical school in the world, and who flourished 300 years before the birth of Christ'' (*West African Countries and Peoples*, 68). Note that here Horton does not tether the designator 'African' to race or colour. In fact, as we shall see below, Horton will show how racial prejudice was absent in the ancient world and we will analyse the implications of this for mid-nineteenth century debates. Horton emphasizes African intellectual achievements in antiquity and contrasts this with what he takes to be the relatively diminished position of Africans in the world at the point in time at which he was writing. Yet for Horton the point is that there is no reason to think that Africans cannot accomplish again what they have accomplished in the past: ''and why should not the same race who governed Egypt, attacked the most famous and flourishing city – Rome, who had her churches, her universities, and her repositories of learning and science, once more stand on their legs and endeavour to raise their characters in the scale of the civilized world?'' (67). Thus, for Horton, the issue is not about showing that at any given point in time disparities do not obtain between different peoples. Rather the point is that such disparities can be overcome. The appeal to the past serves the argumentative function of moving from the actual to the possible. The point is that the question of whether Africans have the potential to achieve civilization is settled by appealing to the fact that they have actually achieved civilization in the past. Moreover, by appealing to the past, he is showing that biological explanations of divergence are inadequate. For if there are biological features which make Africans incapable of achieving civilization, then, assuming that their biological make up has not radically changed in the last two thousand years or so (and his opponents endorsed this claim), then they would not have been able to achieve civilization in the past. Yet they have been able to do so. Therefore, the biological explanation stands refuted. The structure of Horton's argument here is an instantiation of *modus tollens* or denying the consequent.

With respect to this point about the possibility of resurgence, Horton's philosophy of history can be fruitfully compared with the philosophy of history of a thinker who has cast a long shadow over historiography and social theory from the nineteenth century onwards, namely Hegel. Like

Hegel, Horton believes that nations are subjected to processes of flourishing and degeneration. However, unlike Hegel, Horton does not believe that once a nation has degenerated it cannot flourish again. Hegel believed that once a nation has carried out its world-historical role of bringing forth a progressive iteration of *Geist*, it withdraws from the stage of world history (Avineri, "The Fossil and the Phoenix", 47–64). From Horton's perspective, such a claim amounts to an unjustified speculative leap which forecloses the future without adequate justification.

Moreover, unlike Hegel, Horton does not believe that ancient Greek philosophy and science can be explained without reference to developments that occurred elsewhere (especially on the African continent). By contrast, Hegel speaks of an entirely autochthonous development: "the light first becomes in the West the flash of thought [*Blitze des Gedankens*] which strikes within itself, and from thence creates its world out of itself" (Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 99). From Horton's perspective, this involves a distortion of the historical record: "Africa, in ages past, was the nursery of science and literature; from thence they were taught to Greece and Rome, so that it was said that the ancient Greeks represented their favourite goddess of Wisdom – Minerva – as an African princess. Pilgrimages were made to Africa in search of knowledge by such eminent men as Solon, Plato, Pythagoras" (*West African Peoples and Countries*, 66). That Plato visited Egypt is sometimes disputed by contemporary scholars, but even those scholars who dispute this do not dispute that Plato had an extensive knowledge of Egyptian art, including its underlying metaphysical presuppositions which are expressed in its rejection of perspective in favour of a consistent representation of proportion (which appeals to Plato insofar as it involves turning away from sensory perception and towards mathematical relations of proportion which are more fundamental in a metaphysical sense). This knowledge was probably imparted to him by Eudoxus of Cnidus whose visit to Egypt is better documented (Davis, "Plato on Egyptian Art", 121–7). Plato also had a fairly detailed knowledge of Egyptian political institutions and history (Griffiths, "Plato on Priests and Kings in Egypt", 156–7). The ascription of profound wisdom to the ancient Egyptians also continued into late antiquity with Neoplatonists such as Plotinus who was himself a Hellenised Egyptian (MacCoull, "Plotinus the Egyptian?", 330–3), Porphyry, and Iamblichus (Smith, "The Image of Egypt", 319–25).

It is important to note here that Horton's thesis is quite different from the thesis that some Afro-centrists, such as the Guyanese-American historian George James, defended in the twentieth century (Moses, *Afrotopia*, 36). Horton is not claiming that the Greeks 'stole' anything from the ancient Egyptians. Rather his claim is that developments in ancient Greek philosophy and science should be contextualized in relation to intellectual developments in the Mediterranean basin beyond the period of the emergence of classical

Greek culture. The ancient Greeks themselves did not deny that they learned much from the ancient Egyptians. One could hold this view without reducing the ancient Greeks to 'thieves' (e.g. in some version of 'stolen legacy' arguments) or thinking of them as unoriginal. Indeed, even if one thinks of the ancient Greeks as having accomplished something akin to a scientific revolution, the very notion of revolution involves the overturning of received wisdom. The idea of an intellectual revolution which takes place in a total intellectual vacuum is utterly incoherent, for the simple reason that a revolution involves a revolution against a determinate something, and there is evidence that this determinate something was shaped to a certain degree by the interactions between Greeks and peoples living in North Africa, south of the Mediterranean. If we compare Horton's explanation with Hegel's explanation, the former seems much more plausible, i.e. there were cultural borrowings which shaped intellectual life in ancient Greece and at some point, some philosophers reacted against these elements and broke with them. Hegel's explanation on the other hand makes it appear as if early Greek philosophy and early Greek science was a miraculous event that emerged fully formed out of the blue as it were. Moreover, Horton's discussion of ancient Egypt is not an attempt to project modern racial categories upon the past, as we shall see below. This further distinguishes it from some contemporary Afrocentric arguments that are influenced by George James' work. For Horton, to say something like 'Aristotle was white' involves a category error, if the term 'white' is taken in a modern sense, which stems from an ahistorical perspective (because the colour scheme of modern racial categorization was irrelevant in ancient times).

3. Horton on Egypt and the historicization of racial prejudice

The discussion of ancient Egyptian civilization qua African civilization also aims at responding to some of Horton's interlocutors, especially Samuel George Morton. It is important to note that during the first half of the nineteenth century it was widely accepted by many European scholars that ancient Egyptians were Africans.[2] It was only with the work of the American Samuel George Morton that this view lost prominence among Europeans during the 1840s (Bernasconi, "Black Skin, White Skulls", 16). Morton wished to claim that Africans have never achieved any form of civilization. However, ancient Egypt provided an obvious counterexample. Morton's approach was to grant that Egyptian intellectual achievements were significant, and that Greek civilization owed much to Egypt, but deny that

[2]African Americans had been pointing to the 'Africanness' of ancient Egypt since the 1820s in an effort to provide a counterexample to the thesis that African peoples were incapable of civilization (Malamud, "Black Minerva", 74–5).

ancient Egypt was an African civilization in any significant sense.[3] Morton based his study on Egyptian skulls which he managed to acquire through the help of his friend George Gliddon (an Egyptologist and a U.S. vice-consul in Cairo). Morton sought to show that Egyptian skulls were of the Caucasian type (albeit on the lower end in terms of cranial capacity). Gliddon drew upon Morton's work to claim that Africans did not contribute to ancient Egyptian civilization in any significant way. Gliddon was invested in showing that African people in general were incapable of civilization: "civilization … could not spring from Negroes, or from Berbers, and NEVER DID" (quoted in Matić, "De-colonizing the Historiography and Archaeology of Ancient Egypt and Nubia", 25). Note that here, Gliddon is not just claiming that civilization could not spring from 'Black' Africans but also that it could not spring from 'Berbers'. Hence, the debate is really more about the African identity of ancient Egypt rather than its racial identity as specifically 'Black' in modern parlance. Morton and Gliddon were attempting to undermine the use of ancient Egypt as an example of an African civilization. Moreover, Morton was particularly invested in showing that modern racial antipathies also obtained in ancient Egypt, i.e. that 'Negroes' had always occupied the position of servants and slaves. Horton was aware of Morton and his project. While Horton does not explicitly cite Morton's Egyptological work, he does cite him in the context of discussing claims about differences in cranial capacities across races and given Horton's interest in the connection between anatomical debates and historiographical debates, it is highly unlikely that Horton was not aware of Morton's Egyptological project. Horton makes the following explicit reference to Morton: "But the experiments of Aitken Meigs and Morton were made in America on the dead skulls of the negroes, who truly had been transported from their native home in Africa to America, but who for years were subjected to the most depressing influence of slavery, and after years of toil in the field became victims" (*West African Countries and Peoples*, 46). The context of this passage has to do with Horton's critique of Morton's measurements of cranial capacities, and there is no direct reference to Morton's Egyptological work. Yet given the connection between Morton's measurements of cranial capacities and his Egyptological work, it is quite likely that Horton would have been aware of the latter.

Note that one of Morton's key claims is that Africans were treated with contempt in antiquity. This can be read as an attempt to naturalize and dehistoricize racial antipathy. This is similar to the position that Knox held. Recall Knox's claim that anti-Black racism is like a law of nature: "how has

[3]The other approach was not to dispute ancient Egypt's African identity, but rather to denigrate the achievements of ancient Egyptian civilization by denying that the ancient Egyptians had anything like philosophy or science or that they had any influence on Greek philosophy or science.

this antagonism of race arisen? The truth is, it has always existed'' (*The Races of Men*, 546). For Knox the 'Negro' is doomed to be ''a slave to the rest of mankind'' (550). Horton in drawing on classical sources is attempting to show that anti-Black racism is not a trans-historical or natural phenomenon. If in classical antiquity Greek and Roman writers did not think of Africans as inferior to themselves, then this shows that the thesis of universal racial antipathy is simply false.[4] Horton's point is that the ancient Greeks could not have held an attitude of contempt towards Africans (based on modern racialist notions) if they were willing to learn from Africans. Furthermore, Horton is also raising the issue of how racist European and American intellectuals in the nineteenth century were anachronistically reading ancient and medieval texts in a way that led them to find evidence of anti-Black racism where there was none.[5] This historicization would then open the way to attempting to explain racial antipathy by referring to specific historical events (e.g. the Atlantic slave trade, the rise of the early modern life sciences, the rise of fixed racial taxonomies, and so on). This is basically the central contention behind the work of Frank Snowden Jr., who is perhaps the most well-known scholar of the place of African people in the ancient Mediterranean: ''the pattern of black–white relations in the Greco-Roman period helps us understand better some of the reasons for the later development of virulent color prejudice in the modern world'' (''Misconceptions about African Blacks'', 44). Horton thus anticipates one of the basic conceptual moves which we associate with contemporary social critiques of racist discourse, namely de-naturalization in favour of historicization. The point is that paying attention to nineteenth-century African philosophy allows us to recognize that this Snowdenian paradigm has a longer history than is often assumed.

In his account of ancient Egypt, Horton draws on Herodotus in order to argue that at least some ancient Egyptians were 'Black' in the modern sense: ''Herodotus describes them [the ancient Egyptians] as 'woolly-haired blacks, with projecting lips'. In describing the people of Colchis, he says that they were Egyptian colonists, who were 'black in complexion and woolly-haired'. This description undoubtedly refers to a race of negroes, as neither the Copts, their descendants, nor the mummies which have been preserved, would lead us to believe that their complexion is black'' (*West African Countries and Peoples*, 67). However, in this sentence Horton is not denying the link between 'Copts' and ancient Egyptians. Rather he is claiming that

[4]We have to, however, distinguish between two claims. First there is the claim that anti-Black racism did not exist in ancient Greece and Rome. The second claim is that there was nothing approximating racism in the ancient world. The truth of the first claim does not imply that the second claim is true. However, sometimes the two claims are conflated. For more on this issue, see (McCoskey, *Race,* 8–9). For an example of proto-racialist elements in ancient Greek thought, see (El Nabolsy, ''Aristotle on Natural Slavery''; Proios, ''Division and Proto-Racialism in the *Statesman*'').

[5]Such as the misinterpretation of the so-called 'curse of Ham' as analyzed in (Braude, ''The Sons of Noah'', 103–42).

ancient Egypt was a racially diverse African civilization, such that some of its inhabitants would be considered 'Black' by nineteenth-century standards (as well as by today's standards). From the standpoint of our contemporary Egyptological knowledge this is an unproblematic claim. This is because Egyptian identity was understood first and foremost as a cultural and a linguistic identity in ancient Egypt, and not as a racial identity. As the Egyptologist Uroš Matić points out, anyone could become an Egyptian, insofar as an Egyptian was someone who "spoke [the] Egyptian language, worshipped Egyptian gods, and was loyal to the Egyptian state, no matter if he or she was born in Egypt or not" (Matić, *Ethnic Identities*, 10). Being born outside Egypt or being of a different complexion from most Egyptians was simply irrelevant. Horton is of course claiming that some of Egypt's rulers would have been considered to be 'Black' by nineteenth-century standards. Again, Horton is not invested in denying that there were non–'Black' (in the modern sense) tawny ancient Egyptian rulers. His central concern is to present ancient Egypt as a diverse African society. As he puts it: "Northern Egypt then was the most known portion of the globe, and into it vast immigration took place from time to time, even to the most remote period" (*West African Countries and Peoples*, 188).

The discussion of ancient Egypt in Horton's historical account serves three purposes. First, it dispels the notion that Africans (regardless of how they are racially classified in nineteenth-century terms) are incapable of civilization. He shows that Africans have attained significant progress. Indeed, it is precisely by deploying the concept of progress that Horton is able to show that Africans are just like other peoples. Second, it shows that Greek philosophy and science did not emerge in a vacuum. Third, the emphasis on the existence of Pharaohs who were 'Black' by nineteenth-century standards shows that the idea that racial antipathy is a trans-historical phenomenon is simply false. The reference to ancient Greeks going to study in ancient Egypt fulfils the same purpose. The argumentative structure of Horton's approach is very simple yet quite effective. Basically, he was confronted with the following claim: antipathy and contempt for Africans, especially for those Africans who were labelled as 'Negroes' in the nineteenth century is a trans-historical phenomenon; it goes back as far as the earliest civilizations in human history. Faced with this claim, Horton provides a systematically worked out counterexample.

4. The British empire as a failed Roman empire

Furthermore, reflection on the universalism of Roman law and the gradual extension of the scope of Roman citizenship under the Roman Empire would have demonstrated the stark contrast between the assimilative universality of the Roman imperial project and the preservation of perceived

essential differences which characterized the British imperial project, especially in the second half of the nineteenth century. Horton could have pointed to this difference, which would have been an effective argumentative move since British officials often spoke of the Roman empire as a model and they themselves received a classical education (Táíwò, *How Colonialism Pre-empted Modernity*, 128–57). Horton would have been essentially undertaking an internal critique of British colonial practices through engagement with classical sources. In contrast to the British case, Roman citizenship gradually expanded in scope until it came to encompass all of the free inhabitants of the Roman empire with the issuance of the Antonine Constitution by the emperor Caracalla in 212. As the classicist Ralph W. Mathisen points out, "what counted was not ethnicity but distinctions among slaves, freedmen, and full citizens, who had different levels of access to *ius civile*" ("*Peregrini*, *Barbari*, and *Cives Romani*", 1036). The Roman imperial model was based on the assimilation of first, the local conquered elites, who came to share a common identity qua Roman elites (Häussler, "Motivations and Ideologies of Romanization", 11–19), and then later, the assimilation of non-elites under a common identity of Roman citizenship which was not ethnically or racially indexed in anyway. The question is now the following: why should all of these features about the Roman empire matter for Horton? The first element to note is that the British elite thought that their empire was a modern successor to the Roman empire (Mamdani, *Define and Rule*, 74). Yet they did not seem to notice, as Horton must have surely noticed, that there was a striking difference between the two empires. The Roman empire was structured around an ideal of inclusiveness, while the British empire was structured, at least from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, around the ideal of racial segregation and the ossification of perceived cultural differences (*Define and Rule*, 76). The Roman ideal of inclusiveness was actualized in the ascension to the imperial throne of provincials such as the African Septimius Severus, whose mother tongue was Punic (r. 193–211). This inclusivity is also evidenced by the fact that the emperor who presided over the millennium celebration of Rome's founding in 248 A.D. was Philip the Arab, an ethnically Arab Christian. Ethnicity and race, evidently, were not a barrier to attaining the highest office in the empire, a fact which could not have escaped Horton's notice.[6] In this respect the Roman ideal of empire was quite different from the principles that animated British imperial policy makers in the second half of the nineteenth century (despite the fact that they purported to adhere to a Roman model). Thus, Horton is showing that British colonial officials who oppose the modernization of West Africa on the grounds of the postulation of fundamental racial differences are

[6]Romanized 'barbarians' could also attain the highest military ranks in the late Roman Empire, see Goldsworthy, *The Fall of the* West, 290. Horton could not have hoped to attain any such rank.

acting in a manner that is inconsistent with the ideals to which they purport to adhere. Horton deploys a form of internal critique in connection to racist comparative anatomy (El Nabolsy, "James Africanus Beale Horton"), and the very same argumentative strategy is also deployed here in connection to racist imperial policies.

Going back to antiquity is also important for Horton because it enables him to establish the hybridity which he takes to characterize African history (and all human history in general). Horton sees the African continent as having always been connected with the rest of the world. He writes that "the Romans penetrated through the Northern desert [i.e. the Sahara]" (*West African Countries and Peoples*, 188). The extent to which Roman influence extended into and beyond the Sahara is, of course, still debated today (Magnavita, "Initial Encounters"). However, Horton's point, namely that many parts of Africa, even beyond the coastal areas, were integrated into the Mediterranean world at the economic and cultural level is not really in dispute. In fact, Horton is not interested in arguing that exogenous factors, i.e. cultural borrowings from other peoples, did not play an important role in African history (and in fact, as I will argue below, for Horton civilization in general is not possible without cultural borrowing or at least some form of intercultural contact). Hence, his argument cannot be assimilated to debates aimed at showing African priority or African cultural and civilizational purity.

5. Explaining divergences without race

Another reason why the example of Rome is important for Horton is that Roman imperial discourse recognized differences in civilizational attainment between different peoples but did not cash out these differences in terms of immutable properties or in terms of biological properties (of course from the Darwinian perspective, the latter are mutable, but not at the timescale that Horton is interested in). Horton attempts to emphasize that the condition of 'barbarism', as the Romans understood it, is not the product of immutable biological properties.

Drawing on Cicero's description of the ancient Britons, Horton wants to point out that the ancient Britons were 'uncivilized' but that was not an indication of their capacity for civilization (for Horton, nineteenth-century Britain was the most advanced society on Earth): "in the pages of history we find it recorded, by a no less reliable historian than Cicero, that the ancient Britons went about most scantily clothed; they painted their bodies in fantastic fashions, 'offered up human victims to uncouth idols, and lived in hollow trees and rude habitations'. As regards the amount of development of their intellectual and moral faculties, we are told by the same writer that the ugliest and most stupid slaves came from England; and so degraded were the Britons considered in Rome that he urges Atticus, his friend, 'not

to buy slaves from Britain on account of their stupidity and their inaptitude to learn music and other accomplishments'" (*West African Countries and Peoples*, 30). Cicero's description of the ancient Britons is important to Horton for several reasons. First, it shows that the condition of being 'civilized' or 'primitive' was not indexed to skin colour or ethnic identity in the ancient world. Those who were 'uncivilized', or 'barbarians' could become civilized by adopting Hellenistic-Roman cultural forms. Horton recognized that identity markers in the ancient world did not "represent perceived essential differences, just disparities of contingent circumstances" (Gillett, "The Mirror of Jordanes", 395). A foreign society, from a Roman perspective, was not necessarily a barbaric one, as long as it had the markers of what the Romans understood by civilization (e.g. a centralized state, urban centres, and a literary tradition), it could be treated as an equal. This is evident in, for example, late Roman imperial views of the Sassanid empire (McDonough, "Were the Sasanians Barbarians?", 55–65). Second, it shows that attempts by white supremacist intellectuals in the nineteenth century to claim the monopoly over the classical heritage were illegitimate, i.e. the ancient Greeks and the ancient Romans did not think of themselves as 'white Europeans' in the modern sense or as having some kind of relation of racial affinity to the ancestors of modern Northern Europeans. To the contrary, classical writers, for the most part, thought of Northern Europeans as barbarians, i.e. as uncivilized, as evidenced by Horton's quotation from Julius Caesar. Horton is not attempting to claim that Northern Europeans cannot make claims on the classical heritage, but he is indicating that Africans have as good a claim as Northern Europeans. Third, Horton wants to use the comparative ethnological method to show that just as the ancient Britons were able to pass from a condition of barbarism to a condition of civilization, some of the nations inhabiting West Africa could do the same. It is interesting that instead of using the comparative method to draw inferences about how the ancestors of 'civilized' European peoples used to live, he is using it to draw inferences about a common potentiality between the inhabitants of the British Isles and the inhabitants of West Africa (he is thus reversing the standard direction of the analogy). Horton is explicit about this: "I might adduce a great many examples to prove that the natural tendency of the now civilised European was exactly the same as the natural tendency of the now uncivilised African; but I shall here only give a simple proof to show that this is not dissimilar to that of the ancient inhabitants of Britain" (*West African Countries and Peoples*, 30).

Horton uses history to argue for the possibility of perfectibility. While Horton does not explicitly use the term 'perfectibility' he does speak of: "improvement of the highest order", which can be glossed as perfectibility (27). The notion of perfectibility is a particularly modern one, and we can note that the word 'perfectibility' was not used in any European language

before Jean-Jacques Rousseau introduced it in French (Wokler, ''A Reply to Charvet'', 81–90). Perfectibility, in this modernist discourse, is what marks out human beings from other animals and it refers to our capacity to form ourselves through achieving something like a second nature through transforming our social environment, and to our ability to pass on this second nature to future generations and build upon it through education and socialization. Defined in these terms perfectibility as a capacity is a necessary condition for progress. Horton is thus de-racializing progress by de-racializing the capacity that people need to make progress.

For Rousseau, perfectibility is the cause of our moral degradation, since it allowed us to acquire corrupt tastes and distorted our relations with our selves and with moral truth, but for Horton perfectibility is what makes an optimistic philosophy of history possible in the first place. It enables us to say that no matter how degraded our condition might appear to be, there is always the possibility of improvement through a kind of social engineering.[7] Perfectibility, on this view, is also what explains the phenomenon with which Horton is concerned here, i.e. the possibility that a people who are in a condition of barbarism, or who have lapsed back into a condition of semi-barbarism, might yet experience a resurgence. For some Enlightenment intellectuals such as Ferdinando Galiani (1728–1787), perfectibility was exclusive to whites: ''perfectibility is not a gift given to man in general, but only to the white and bearded race'' (quoted in Curran, *The Anatomy of Blackness*, 169).[8] Horton, by contrast, showed that all anatomical attempts to show that there is a fundamental inequality between races fail, and consequently insofar as this restriction of perfectibility was based on anatomical grounds, it stands without adequate justification.

Horton adduces other examples where a given people has been initially judged to be incapable of progress only for subsequent historical developments to falsify this claim. Horton is particularly interested in the Russian example and the reforms under Peter the Great. Horton quotes the following passage from the abolitionist Wilson Armistead: ''the same race which in the age of Tacitus dwelt in solitary dens and morasses, have built St. Petersburg and Moscow; and the posterity of the cannibals now feed on wheaten bread. Little more than a century ago Russia was covered with the hordes of barbarians'' (*West African Countries and Peoples*, 65). Horton is drawing upon history to develop an inductive argument to argue for the thesis that claims to the

[7]Rousseau's concept of perfectibility was the centerpiece of theories of progress in the late eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century, see (Sonenscher, "Sociability, Perfectibility and the Intellectual Legacy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau", 683–98).

[8]A similar sentiment is also detectable in Rousseau, although it is not spelled out explicitly in terms of perfectibility but rather in terms of freedom: "freedom is not the fruit of every climate, and it is not therefore within the capacity of every people. The more one reflects on this doctrine of Montesquieu, the more one is conscious of its truth" (Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 124). Horton, of course, did not accept this geographical determinist view.

effect that a given people are doomed to backwardness and stupidity have been common throughout history (especially by their conquerors), but that they have also always turned out to be false. The intended effect is that those who hold that African peoples are not capable of improvement should adopt some epistemic humility or even revise their views insofar as one can produce an inductive argument based on a collection of historical facts to show that people who have made assumptions about the fate of a subjugated people have almost always turned out to be wrong.

In his *Letters on the Political Condition of the Gold Coast*, Horton emphasizes this point. The opening line of the preface is: "'Rome was not built in a day;' the proudest kingdom in Europe was once in a state of barbarism perhaps worse than now exists amongst the tribes chiefly inhabiting the West Coast of Africa; and it is an incontrovertible axiom that what has been done can again be done" (i). Here Horton is arguing from the actual to the possible. However, his framing in terms of "that what has been done can again be done" requires clarification. For this by itself is not sufficient, for one can think of things which have been done but which cannot be done again because the circumstances have changed significantly. To this extent, Horton must show that the conditions which made possible the rise of civilization in Northern Europe can be replicated.

6. Cultural contact as a means of progress

For Horton, the first and most important condition for the transformation of a 'primitive' or 'semi-barbarous' society into a 'civilized society' is the existence of another civilized society. In fact, Horton explicitly claims that sustained encounters with a civilized society are a necessary condition for the transformation of an 'uncivilized' society: "it is impossible for a nation to civilize itself; civilization must come from abroad. As was the case with the civilized continents of Europe and America, so it must be with Africa; which cannot be an exception to the rule" (*West African Countries and Peoples*, 196). This is the core of his philosophy of history. We have seen how in his account of ancient Egypt, for example, he emphasizes that Egypt benefitted from contact with other peoples. The same goes for his account of the rise of Russia: "this [Russia's rise] is mainly produced by the extension of their communication with the more civilized portion of the globe, and by the change of their habits and modes of life" (66). Inter-societal contacts and the opportunities for learning and borrowing that they enable are the key driving forces in human progress according to Horton. Horton might have thought that this was the case because contact with an alien culture forces us to examine the usually unexamined elements in our own cultural practices and subject them to scrutiny, i.e. things which we take for granted as obviously true may not appear to us to be so after having had to explain their function or justification

to a foreigner. Cultural and societal contacts also allow different peoples to borrow from each other, depending on their needs.

It is important to note that Horton is not saying that 'African societies cannot civilize themselves if taken in isolation', he is saying that 'human societies if taken in isolation, without any racial qualifications, cannot civilize themselves'. So, in his view, Northern Europeans could not have attained civilization had they not been in contact with the civilizations of the Mediterranean basin, and the Mediterranean societies of antiquity could not have attained civilization had they not been in contact with the advanced societies of the Nile valley. Horton's philosophy of history is similar to Alexander Crummell's philosophy of history in this regard. Speaking of the need for African Americans to contribute to Africa's development, Crummell writes: "you will remember that the civilization of all races has been conditioned on contact. It is the remark of a great German historian [Barthold Georg Niebuhr] – perhaps the greatest historian of modern times: 'There is not in history the record of a single indigenous civilization; there is nowhere, in any reliable document, the report of any people lifting themselves up out of barbarism. The historic civilizations are all exotic. The torches that blaze along the line of centuries were kindled, each by the one behind'" (quoted in Táíwò, "Excluded Moderns", 186). For Crummell, like Horton, the need for contact with a civilized society has nothing to do with anything that is specific to Africans, rather it is a universal law applicable to all human societies.[9]

At first glance, there might appear to be a problem with Horton's model of the history of civilization as a universal process of diffusion. For if 'it is impossible for a nation to civilize itself', then how did the first civilized society ever emerge on Horton's account (and presumably, for Horton, ancient Egypt would be the first civilized society in human history)? One solution is to make a distinction between contact with a civilized society and contact with another society, i.e. prior to the rise of the first civilized society, societies were in contact with each other. The most plausible reading of Horton's account is that the first civilized society emerged as the result of encounters between several uncivilized societies. This interpretation keeps Horton's emphasis on intersocietal and intercultural contact without circularity. Moreover, Horton is not primarily interested in how the first civilized societies on Earth emerged, he is primarily interested in how 'barbaric', and 'semi-barbaric' societies civilize themselves (hence, his interest in the case of Russia, for example). There is of course a potential problem here for Horton, namely that the idea of cultural contact as a driver of civilizational development was used

[9]It is also likely that Horton had access to Niebuhr's work, as Horton read German, and at any rate English translations of the second edition of *Römische Geschichte* appeared between 1828 and 1844 (Vance, "Niebuhr in England", 83–9). In fact, Horton explicitly cites Niebuhr in support of his contention that there is a natural human tendency towards progress (*West African Countries and Peoples*, 33).

in the second half of the nineteenth century to justify the British imperial mission. Due to limitations of space, I cannot provide a detailed treatment of this problem, which I hope to take up in subsequent work. However, one should note that Horton by drawing on the Russia example is signalling that the paradigm cases of contact for him do not involve conquest by the more civilized society of the less civilized society.

7. Conclusion

Horton, in addition to providing a strong critique of biological-racialist philosophies of history on anatomical grounds, provides an alternative explanatory paradigm for philosophy of history. In particular, he develops an explanatory paradigm that emphasizes factors such as environmental changes, cultural contact with other societies (and the severing of such contacts), and failures of social organization due to decadence after a period of high civilizational achievements in a given society in order to explain the divergence in the level of civilizational achievement that he discerns when comparing West African societies with Western European societies (especially Britain). Horton demonstrates to his Victorian interlocutors that there are good reasons for refraining from inferring that a given people or society is unable to achieve further progress because it appears to lag behind at a given moment in time. Horton, as a Victorian African, took it for granted that some societies are more civilized than others, but he resisted the thesis that this can be explained by appealing to racial differences. Through offering this alternative paradigm, Horton found a way to sever the concept of progress from racist assumptions. This makes Horton's work particularly relevant for contemporary debates about the concept of progress and whether it needs to be jettisoned when talking, for example, about economic development.

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