Hume on Structural Prejudices (Including His Own)

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This paper explores the connections between David Hume's theory of prejudice, present-day theories of structural ignorance, and Hume's own racist attitudes. Like many 17th- and 18th-century philosophers, David Hume develops a theory of prejudices: opinions that have not been thought through but have been accepted on the basis of, for example, misleading sensory impressions, custom, education, or misplaced authority. More than others before him, however, Hume focuses his attention on 'social' prejudice: prejudice that is social in the double sense of being directed at social groups and of being shaped by forces that are social in that they are (as I will argue) structural.

Investigating the social aspect of Humean prejudices allows us to connect Hume's thought to some of his own personal prejudices. The notion of structural ignorance has recently been an important tool for critical (or non-ideal) social epistemology to explain and diagnose the persistence of racist, sexist and other objectionable attitudes. It can be used in this way also in relation to Hume's own racist attitudes. The relation of the concept of structural ignorance to its history remains understudied.[1] The paper attempts to contribute to this history by finding an early theory of structural

[1] For example, neither the recent *Routledge Handbook of Social Epistemology* (Fricker et al., 2020) nor that of *Political Epistemology* (Hannon and de Ridder, 2021) contain chapters on early modern philosophy.

ignorance in Hume. It should be said at the outset that the aim of this analysis is not to show that Hume is, after all, not racist. It does not even show that his racism is inconsistent with his theory of prejudice (sadly, they are consistent). But it yields the lesser but still important result that Humean materials can be used to diagnose Hume's own flawed racist beliefs.

Hume's relevance for critical and structural projects in epistemology has been noted before. Annette Baier already wrote that Hume gives a "very new turn […] to epistemology" by developing the view that "any individual's or any group's chance of accumulating a store of truths depends, in the first instance, on the authority structure of the society" (Baier 1994a, 90). However, neither Baier nor, to my knowledge, anyone else has so far explored this suggestion at length and connected it to the role of prejudice in Hume's epistemology.[2]

The paper is structured as follows. The next section introduces the notion of structural ignorance and argues for its historical usefulness by showing that Hume's own racist statements plausibly result from white ignorance. At that point I will move to what is the core of the paper, a suggested Humean explanation of structural ignorance that discusses in turn the *formation* of prejudice, the ways it can be *corrected*, and the structural influences on both of these processes (sections 2-4). After summarizing, I conclude in section 5 by stressing the limits that Hume's own racism places on his attempt to develop a structural epistemology.

[2] Popkin (1980, 259) and Valls (2005a, 138) have previously pointed out a connection between Hume's theory of prejudices and his racism, but this is the first sustained discussion.

1. Hume's structural ignorance

In his influential essay "White Ignorance", Charles Mills writes that "modern mainstream Anglo-American epistemology was for hundreds of years [...] profoundly inimical terrain for the development of any concept of structural group-based miscognition" (Mills 2007, 13). For Mills, to use a structural approach in epistemology is thus to break away from the "mainstream" of a long tradition. This approach is associated with the wider movement of "critical" or "non-ideal" social epistemology, which rejects what it sees as the individualist and idealizing orientation of previous epistemology in favor of a more embodied, concrete and (potentially) political view of what it means to know and the conditions under which knowledge is (or is not) possible.[3] This approach is fruitful, including for work in the history of philosophy, where it has played an important role in raising awareness about the racism, sexism, and other objectionable attitudes of previous philosophers, as well as of the philosophical canon itself.[4] Nevertheless, I hope to use the example of Hume to show that there are reasons to doubt Mills's generalization: Hume is one undeniably mainstream philosopher who *is* aware of structural, group-based miscognition.

[3] Mills (2005a), Begby (2021), McKenna (2023, chs. 1-2). The non-ideal turn can be further connected to a "political turn" (Bordonaba-Plou, Fernández-Castro and Ramón-Torices, 2022).

[4] There is by now a large literature devoted to the recovery of early modern women philosophers and the study of sexism in the philosophical canon. Just a few methodological texts relating to this project are: O'Neill (1998, 2005), Hutton (2015, 2019) and Shapiro (2016); see also the collections O'Neill and Lascano (2019); Detlefsen and Shapiro (2023). Race appears comparatively neglected, but besides Mills (1997, 2017), see Rosenthal (2005), Smith (2015), Valls (2005b) and Jorati (2024); for race and the Enlightenment, see Eze (1997, 2001), Israel (2006, chap. 23) and Muthu (2003).

The particular instance of structural ignorance Mills develops in his essay is white ignorance. White ignorance is ignorance caused by structural racism. It is a structural ignorance, in that it results from and is to be explained in terms of these racist structures.[5] White ignorance may involve the operation of explicit prejudices, if these prejudices have been structurally caused. For example, someone may be unwilling to learn about a non-white culture because they have internalized prejudices about that culture. However, white ignorance can also occur without any explicit prejudice at all. For example, until recently and even continuing today, it could be quite difficult for a Westerner to learn about African philosophy simply due to a lack of scholarly work on the topic. In this case, the lack of research is plausibly partly due to racial prejudices, but the ignorance of the interested Westerner need not be: they may have a sincere desire to know and still remain ignorant due to lack of material. To give another example (taken from Martín 2021, 878), a doctor may sincerely want to help a non-white patient, but be unable to do so effectively and responsibly because the medicinal treatment she wants to offer has been tested exclusively on white patients and may have adverse side-effects when used on her patient, leaving the doctor ignorant of its effectiveness.

In his essay, Mills gives a number of characteristics of white ignorance (Mills 2007, 20-3). The most important for present purposes are these. White ignorance is ignorance (i) caused by racism, (ii) that does not require racist convictions on the part of the knower (21); (iii) does not even require "bad faith" (21); (iv) has a moral dimension, by producing ignorance about morally important

[5] See Haslanger (2016) and Soon (2021) for more on social structural explanation. Influenced by these authors, my use of the concept of structural explanation is broader than Mills' own, which is specifically focused on racial structures. I return to the differences between white ignorance and the theory of structural ignorance I find in Hume in the conclusion.

matters as well as an inability to accurately assess moral situations (22); and (v) is unlikely to be overcome by any individual knower's efforts. Using recent work of Annette Martín (2021), it is possible to further distinguish between three ways in which white ignorance can be structural: on the *willful ignorance* view, it results from a deliberate attempt on the part of knowers to remain ignorant about racial injustices; on the *cognitivist* view – which Martín ascribes to Mills – it results from mistakes in the agent's cognitive processes that are explained by reference to social practices; finally, on the *structuralist* view, white ignorance "systematically arises as part of some social structural process(es) that systematically gives rise to racial injustice", which it in turn plays a part in perpetuating (Martín 2021, 875).

Because white ignorance results from racist structures that develop and self-perpetuate over time, it has a historical dimension. It should then not be surprising to find expressions of white ignorance in historical authors, as Mills's work itself shows (see in particular Mills 1997, 2005b). Another case of a historical philosopher marked by white ignorance is Hume, or so I will now argue. Hume's racism has been much discussed ever since it was pointed out by Richard Popkin (1980, 1992) and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1987). Although some have argued that Hume's views were expressions of wider prejudices of his time and culture (Palter 1995; Garrett 2000), and others have questioned whether his views were racist in the first place (Valls 2005a), there appears to be a growing consensus that Hume's views were racist, and were extreme even by the standards of his time (Immerwahr 1992; Eze, 2000; Garrett & Sebastiani 2017; Willis 2019; Jorati 2024, 126-139) – a view supported by the fact that they were attacked during his lifetime, including notably by James Beattie (Beattie 1770, 479-84).

Hume's bluntest and most damning racist statements occur in a footnote in his essay "Of National Characters". This essay is an attack on the so-called 'climate' theory of human difference, which

explains the differences between human groups by the influence of what Hume calls "physical causes": "those qualities of the air and climate, which are supposed to work insensibly on the temper, by altering the tone and habit of the body, and giving a particular complexion".[6] This theory had ancient origins and had been defended by Montesquieu in the *Spirit of the Laws* (1748), although Hume's attack is more likely to have been aimed at earlier authors like Jean-Baptiste du Bos and John Arbuthnot (Perinetti 2006, 1120). Hume argues that most human differences are due to "moral causes": "all circumstances, which are fitted to work on the mind as motives or reasons, and which render a peculiar set of manners habitual to us" (NC 2/EMPL 198). He thus sets out to explain most human differences in terms of the influence of what he elsewhere calls "custom", or what could now be described as socio-cultural causes. He argues that physical causes are neither necessary nor sufficient for human difference. They are not necessary, because there is much cultural diversity even among nations that share the same climate; and not sufficient, because some human groups (Hume cites the examples of priests and soldiers: NC 4-6/EMPL 198-201) and some cultures (e.g., the Chinese: NC 11/EMPL 204) show markedly similar behavior and manners across climates.

[6] NC 2/EMPL 198. Hume's texts are cited first by a reference to a specific section, followed by a page number in the edition used. Unless otherwise indicated, all italics and small caps in citations from Hume are his own. I use the following abbreviations for Hume's works: EMPL = *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary* (Hume 1994); EPM = *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, cited by section and paragraph number, followed by page number in Hume (1998); MP = "Of Moral Prejudices", cited from EMPL by paragraph number; NC = "Of National Characters", cited from EMPL by paragraph number; OC = "Of Commerce", cited from EMPL by paragraph number; RA = "Of Refinement in the Arts", cited from EMPL by paragraph number; T = *Treatise of Human Nature*, cited by book, section, and paragraph number, followed by page number in Hume (2007). Paragraph numbers for essays in EMPL are available in the online versions of the essays on www.davidhume.org.

This socio-constructivist account of human difference is, however, subject to one enormous limitation: race. In the footnote, Hume commits himself to a race realism and states that he is "apt to suspect the negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites." He supports this by noting black people's supposed lack of civilizational accomplishments: "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." This "uniform and constant difference" between black and white people is, for Hume, inexplicable if "nature had not made an original distinction between these breeds of men". That this is a natural difference, hence not the result of moral causes, is shown for Hume by the supposed fact that no black slave has "ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity" even when brought to Europe, were they would otherwise have been subject to the influence of the moral cause of white civilization (as, Hume claims, even barbarous white groups such as the "ancient Germans" and the "Tartars" are). Hume's racism is evident from his positing of this natural, racial difference and his belief that black people are inferior because of their race.[7]

Few would deny that Hume's views on race are ignorant, as the passage is riddled with expressions of this ignorance. The footnote is deeply flawed and careless in both its statements of 'fact' and its arguments. Hume's claim that no black slave in Europe has "ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity" is both absurd on its face and, one suspects, unsupported by any sustained investigation on Hume's part. Furthermore, he betrays a marked ignorance, as well as a nonchalance, about the limits of his knowledge about black people. Although some of the wordings of the passage (such

[7] NC 20n6/EMPL 208n10. See esp. Garrett (2004), Garrett and Sebastiani (2017) and Jorati (2024, 126-39) for fuller discussion of the footnote and Hume's views on race. For discussion of some of the other passages in Hume that support the accusation of racism, see Willis (2019).

as “apt to suspect” and “scarcely ever”) seem designed to soften Hume’s conclusions (cf. Baier 1994c, 292), their effect is undone by his exaggerations.

However, accepting that Hume’s views are ignorant, are they an expression of white ignorance? That is to say, do they express an ignorance that is the result of his position in a society that discriminates against black people? Any attempt to answer this question must be somewhat speculative because, as Mills notes, it is difficult to demonstratively show the causal influence of race on someone’s beliefs (Mills 2007, 21). However, there are several reasons for thinking that Hume’s beliefs *were* caused by white ignorance, making what I think is a strong but not a definitive case. Firstly, Hume’s position in a racist, slave-trading society could have given him several incentives to adopt racist views without examining them properly. His espousal of such views could have won him favor among the upper-class members of his audience, who were likely to be active in the slave trade. As Andre Willis puts it, these views arguably possessed both “political expediency” for Hume himself and “economic benefit” for the high-placed men who read his works and who employed him in the various political posts he held later in life (Willis 2019, 498). Moreover, Hume is now thought to have been active on the margins of the slave trade as well, and so the view that black slaves are inferior would have also been welcome to him for that reason.[8] Secondly, besides his own sociocultural position, his reading was arguably structurally limited by an absence of good sources. Hume’s view that no black society has ever included “manufactures”, “arts” or “sciences” evidently purports to be based on some amount of study by him. The absence of informed and unbiased scholarship can, then, have influenced him, and this is a structural influence.

[8] Hume is thought to have “participated in (and may have personally profited from) the purchase and sale of a slave plantation” (Willis 2019, 499).

Thirdly, and perhaps more subjectively, Hume's apparent lapses of logic in the footnote can be explained by the social influence of prejudice.

To repeat, these reasons are not meant to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that Hume suffered from white ignorance. However, taken together, I believe they make a plausible case for a structural influence on Hume's racial ignorance. His ignorance certainly appears "willful", to use Martín's term – or "active", to use Medina's term for "an ignorance that occurs with the active participation of the subject and with a battery of defense mechanisms" (2013, 39).[9] The fact that Hume's views were influenced by structural forces does not entail that he does not bear responsibility for them. On the contrary, the footnote would unfortunately go on to have its own effects on later racists and defenders of slavery, an effect that would not have occurred if it had been written by someone with a lower stature than Hume, and which he himself could have anticipated.[10]

2. General rules and the formation of prejudice

Hume fell prey to white ignorance despite himself having a sophisticated theory of group ignorance. Over the following sections, I will reconstruct this theory. Although Hume's racism prevents him from developing this into a theory of white ignorance, the building blocks for such a theory seem to be present in his thought.

[9] Thanks to Aditi Chaturvedi for pointing out to me the fittingness of active ignorance to describe Hume's case.

[10] Hume's footnote was taken up by later defenders of slavery and racism – such as the planters Edward Long (Popkin 1980, 262-3) and Samuel Estwick (Jorati 2024, 127) – but also by philosophers. Kant paraphrases and endorses substantial parts of the footnote in his 1764 *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (see Kant 2007, 59).

Hume's theory is situated within the rich discourse on prejudice in early modern philosophy. The concept was used by early modern thinkers to refer to any kind of opinion that was held without having been examined properly and that was resistant to evidence. Francis Bacon's "idols of the mind" and René Descartes's "preconceived opinions" were influential articulations of this concept.[11] Central to the concept of prejudice is an implied opposition of reason, which is required to uncover and overcome prejudices, to the imagination, which generates them. The imagination in turn produces some prejudices 'naturally', as a result of its normal operations: for example, the false belief that the sun moves around the earth is naturally suggested by the observation of a sunrise. Other prejudices are, however, due to 'artificial' causes, such as the influence of education, language or, more broadly, the customs of one's society.[12] In Hume's time, Voltaire still uses the term in its by then traditional meaning when he writes in the *Philosophical Dictionary* that a prejudice is "an opinion that's not based on judgement" (Voltaire [1764] 2011, 216).

Hume is indebted to this tradition, but he modifies it in two ways. First, as will become more clear in the next section, there is no place in Hume's theory of mind for an opposition of reason and imagination as distinct operations of the mind; accordingly, his theory of prejudice must go to some lengths to explain how one customary belief can correct another. Secondly, Hume is perhaps the first philosopher who focuses significant attention on *social* prejudices: ill-founded opinions that are both due to social influences and, crucially, judge someone based on the social group they (are thought to) belong to. Although the notion of prejudice could be popularly used in this social

[11] For Bacon's theory of idols, see *Novum Organum* I, sections 38-68 and Cassan (2021). For Descartes on prejudice, see, e.g., *Discourse on Method* II-III, *Principles of Philosophy* I, articles 71-76, as well as Schmitter (2020).

[12] For this distinction between natural and artificial causes of prejudice, see e.g. Bacon (2000, 18-9).

sense, to my knowledge Hume is the first to give pride of place in his analysis of prejudice to the role of social categorization.[13]

Hume's most extensive account of prejudices occurs in Book 1, Part 3 of the *Treatise*, in the course of a discussion of various kinds of "unphilosophical probability", or probable opinions that nevertheless have no "reasonable foundations of belief and opinion" (T 1.3.13.1/97).[14] Hume writes:

> A *fourth* unphilosophical species of probability is that deriv'd from *general rules*, which we rashly form to ourselves, and which are the source of what we properly call PREJUDICE. An *Irishman* cannot have wit, and a *Frenchman* cannot have solidity; for which reason, tho' the conversation of the former in any instance be visibly very agreeable, and of the latter very judicious, we have entertain'd such a prejudice against them, that they must be dunces or fops in spite of sense and reason. Human nature is very subject to errors of this kind; and perhaps this nation as much as any other. (T 1.3.13.7/99-100)

[13] Montesquieu uses the notion in this popular sense in his *Persian Letters* (1721/2008), as did travel writers. While earlier authors such as François Poulain de la Barre (see Schmitter 2018) and Mary Astell (Forbes 2019) use the concept to attack social prejudice against the intellectual abilities of women, their theories are not grounded in a theory of social organization like Hume's is, and they present what are arguably individualist remedies for prejudice.

[14] Prejudice is also discussed in an esthetic context in "Of the Standard of Taste". Its connection to general rules means that it plays an important role throughout Hume's philosophy, as will become clear. The early, subsequently withdrawn essay "Of Moral Prejudices" describes as prejudiced certain contemporary intellectual movements that, to Hume, exemplified the danger of "depart[ing] too far from the receiv'd Maxims of Conduct and Behaviour, by a refin'd Search after Happiness or Perfection" (MP 5/EMPL 542). For scholarly discussions of Hume's theory of general rules and prejudice, see Hearn (1970, 1976), Biro (2008, 53-6) and Falkenstein (2012).

In other words, a prejudice results from a general rule by which we classify people. Because general rules apply *generally* but not *universally* (i.e., they admit of exceptions), they can lead us to mis-categorize individuals, even against the better evidence of our direct experience. Such a misapplication of a general rule is what Hume calls a prejudice.

Prejudices also have the dispositional or habitual character that was generally ascribed to them in the period. They operate largely unconsciously, outside of the direct awareness or control of the person who has them. As Hume writes, a general rule "precedes reflection" (T 1.3.13.8/100).

Hume goes on to explain the mechanisms that underlie general rules. Importantly, they are the same as those that produce our causal beliefs:

> Shou'd it be demanded why men form general rules, and allow them to influence their judgment, even contrary to present observation and experience, I shou'd reply, that in my opinion it proceeds from those very principles, on which all judgments concerning causes and effects depend. (T 1.3.13.8/100)

Hume describes two distinct mechanisms for the production of prejudice. He does not distinguish them clearly, yet the differences in the way they operate are significant for his theory of prejudice. I will label the mechanisms 'hasty induction' and 'mistaken causality'. *Hasty induction* occurs when, having previously associated a particular quality Q with a particular person P, we infer when subsequently presented with someone who resembles P in some respect that this other person also has Q. The strength of this inference depends, according to Hume, on how strongly the person resembles P. "In proportion as the resemblance decays, the probability diminishes; but still has some force as long as there remain any traces of the resemblance." (T 1.3.13.8/100) Thus, to repeat

Hume's example, having previously associated some Irish people with witlessness, on being presented with a new Irish person I immediately infer that they lack wit.[15]

The other principle is *mistaken causality*, where we confuse causes with accidents:

> In almost all kinds of causes there is a complication of circumstances, of which some are essential, and others superfluous; some are absolutely requisite to the production of the effect, and others are only conjoin'd by accident. Now we may observe, that when these superfluous circumstances are numerous, and remarkable, and frequently conjoin'd with the essential, they have such an influence on the imagination, that even in the absence of the latter they carry us on to the conception of the usual effect, and give to that conception a force and vivacity, which make it superior to the mere fictions of the fancy. (T 1.3.13.9/100)

Suppose a cause C is responsible for an effect E. C almost always occurs together with D, although D can occur without C. Although D does not cause E, and C would cause E even in the absence of D, the mind comes to associate D with E to such an extent that it forms the mistaken belief that D causes E. The next time the mind perceives D, it immediately infers E, even when C is absent. For example, the cultural causes (C) of witlessness (E) in Irish society co-occur, naturally enough, with Irishness (D). The mind comes to associate them, to the point that it associates Irishness itself with witlessness, even when presented with an entertaining Irishman.

[15] It will be necessary to repeat Hume's examples frequently in what follows. Because I am uncomfortable with the very principle on the basis of which Hume makes his generalizations, I am also uncomfortable with trying to develop less offensive (or strange) examples of my own. So, for historical fidelity, I will simply repeat Hume's stereotypes. My doing so should never be taken to imply endorsement.

Prejudice can result, then, from either hasty induction or mistaken causality. Hume never explains which of these mechanisms operates when; it seems both will often be at play at once. Both seem capable of explaining his two examples, the Frenchman and the Irishman. According to both mechanisms, the mistake I make when I encounter but fail to appreciate a sharp-witted Irishman is that I infer from the general rule that Irishmen are not witty to the case of this particular Irishman. The mistake is a logical fallacy: from the fact that something is *generally* the case, it cannot be inferred that it is *always* the case.

Note, however, that the mechanisms differ in relation to the status of the general rule itself. If prejudice is based on a hasty induction, the general rule that underlies it may nevertheless be true. So, while the inference from the general to the particular case is mistaken, the association it relies on is not. That is, my previous experience really did, according to Hume, show that the Irish are (on the whole) witless. Hence, even though I go wrong in pre-reflectively taking this general rule to hold *universally*, as a *general* rule the prejudice is not mistaken. Hume does not deny that the Irish are, generally, unwitty.

By contrast, if the mechanism is mistaken causality, then the association that produces prejudice may be false. Because in that case, what really causes my association of witlessness and Irish people may be entirely different from anything actually caused by Irishness. Thus, to vary the previous example, the cause (C) of witlessness (E), which co-occurs with Irishness (D), may be that I am a boorish Brit who has only had very limited experience of Irish people and does not know how to make conversation with them. In this case, the general rule cannot be trusted, because it does not point to a real causal mechanism. It is not that the Irish are really witless – they just appear so in conversation with me. (Note that by contrast, in this case, too, there is some justification for forming the inductive belief that my next experience with an Irishman will not be riveting.)

Although he does not point this out, Hume's theory is, then, capable of explaining both well- and ill-founded general rules. It is worth pointing this out even if, on the whole, Hume appears to think that general rules, at least when it comes to human groups, are correct. This is circumstantially supported by "Of National Characters" itself. The national characters discussed in that essay are themselves general rules. Hume thinks that national characters do exist, even if he thinks they are socially constructed. As he writes, "Men of sense […] 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." (NC 1/EMPL 197) It seems, then, that "Irishmen are witless" has the same status as "Turks are brave" and "the English know more than the Danes" (see NC 15 and 1, respectively). Hume notes explicitly that not everyone in a nation exhibits its national character; for example, there are knowledgeable Danes like Tycho Brahe (NC 1/EMPL 197). Accordingly, a well-informed or "wise" (T 1.3.13.12/102) observer will avoid prejudice by not judging individual instances by the general rule. Still, the disappointing conclusion seems to be that Hume believes that prejudice consists in the first place in the *misapplication* of general rules, but not in the process of generalization itself.[16] It is unsurprising that he states several bigoted general rules, including arguably the example of the Irish itself, as well as the antisemitic trope that "the Jews in Europe" are "noted for fraud" (NC 14/EMPL 205).

3. The correction of prejudice

For Hume, the processes by which we form general rules are at work in all of our experiences. They result from just the same processes that produce our causal beliefs, which are central to the

[16] *Pace* some commentators, like Don Garrett (1997, 144) and Lorne Falkenstein (2012, 118).

operation of the mind. This is one way in which Hume inherits the older tradition according to which prejudice is nothing other than insufficiently supported habitual belief: his social prejudices are continuous with errors of reasoning in other domains. However, if prejudices are so ingrained into our perceptions of other people, how can we avoid being taken in by them? How can we counter these unreflective miscategorizations?

Hume shows some concern about this issue. Similar to previous theories, he poses it as a problem of how the "judgement" can correct the "imagination", but supplies his own, innovative understanding of how these operate. "Imagination" here refers to the principles of association that produce general rules, a process that, once established, Hume also calls "custom". But as he notes, "According to my system, all reasonings are nothing but the effects of custom; and custom has no influence, but by enlivening the imagination, and giving us a strong conception of any object." (T 1.3.13.11/101) Because judgement, for Hume, is nothing over and above a mechanism of the imagination, he needs to account for how the former can oppose, let alone correct, the latter; a challenge that does not arise for theories of prejudice that construe reason and imagination as separate mental faculties.

Hume writes that: "This difficulty we can remove after no other manner, than by supposing the influence of general rules" (T 1.3.13.11/101). General rules can have a "second influence" distinct from the "first influence" of unreflective rules:

> When an object appears, that resembles any cause in very considerable circumstances, the imagination naturally carries us to a lively conception of the usual effect, tho' the object be different in the most material and most efficacious circumstances from that cause. Here is the first influence of general rules. But when we take a review of this act of the mind, and compare it with the more general and authentic operations of the understanding, we find it to be of an

> irregular nature, and destructive of all the most establish'd principles of reasoning; which is the cause of our rejecting it. This is a second influence of general rules, and implies the condemnation of the former. (T 1.3.13.12/101-2)

Previous commentators have struggled with this passage. To Thomas K. Hearn (1970), Hume's distinction here is between two different *kinds* of rules, which seem to operate in different manners. While the "first" kind of rule consists in generalizations, Hume seems to see the "second" kind as operating to undo the generalizations of the first. Additionally, while the first rules operate mostly unconsciously, or to "precede reflection" as Hume puts it, the second rules seem to operate consciously and reflectively. Finally, the second rules appear to have a normative or, as Hearn puts it, "directive" character that the first rules lack (Hearn 1970, 411). Hearn tentatively concludes that "Hume has called 'general rules' two things which are very different" (411).

However, it is not clear that the distinction between the two 'kinds' of rules goes as deep as Hearn thinks. Hume rather seems to distinguish between two kinds of propensities of the mind, both of which can be at play in any given situation. These propensities differ in that one derives from the imagination and the other from the understanding, as well as in their trustworthiness, but they otherwise operate similarly. The first is the generalizing principle that produces prejudice. The second propensity, meanwhile, functions on the basis of custom and resemblance as much as the first. It is just that it is a propensity that the mind has taught itself, or that others have taught it, that produces correct inferences instead of faulty, prejudiced ones. So unlike the first kind of general rules, which function as part of the natural operations of the imagination, the second kind of rule does not arise naturally outside of Hume's broad category of "reflection". It is important to see that education as well as habituation and social influence can play a role even in the "second

influence" of general rules, because this also makes it easier to see how even reflective general rules can be structurally influenced.

Hume himself points to his "rules by which to judge of causes and effects" as examples of correct general rules (see T 1.3.13.11/101). Let's consider the first three of these rules. I first quote them (from T 1.3.15.3-5/116) and then immediately rephrase them to bring out their generalizing character.

1. "The cause and effect must be contiguous in space and time." Or: if *x* and *y* are not contiguous in space and time, then they are not causally related.
2. "The cause must be prior to the effect." Or: if *x* is not prior to *y*, then *x* does not cause *y*.
3. "There must be a constant union betwixt the cause and effect." Or: if *x* and *y* are not constantly united, then they are not causally related.

The rephrased versions of the rules are generalizations that support inferences just like the general rules of the imagination. They first categorize *x* and *y* and then draw a conclusion from this categorization. Admittedly, these causal rules differ from the previous ones in their logical form: unlike the other rules, they depend on a comparison of multiple things instead of simple classification, and they infer a negation rather than a positive claim. Still, they are sufficiently similar that giving them the same name makes sense. Of course, the most material way in which the causal rules differ from the associations of the imagination is that Hume sees inferences based on them as valid and not in need of correction.

How can these general rules of the understanding correct the general rules of the imagination? Once again, Hume is not as explicit about this as we might wish. However, here are three suggestions. First, Hume himself points out that the causal rules are designed to determine which potential

causes are essential to the production of an effect and which are only incidental. In this way, the causal rules counteract mistaken causality. Second, rule 3 can function as a rule against the prejudiced inference from the general to the particular. In the case of prejudices, characteristics like 'being Irish' and 'being witless' do not occur together so often as to be constantly united. Rule 3 therefore reveals that Irishness cannot be a cause of lack of wit. This not only counteracts the mistaken association, it can also act as a counterweight to the mind's tendency to make a hasty induction in the moment. That is, the explicit realization that Irishness and witlessness are not necessarily related can correct one's unconscious tendency to make that inference.

Thirdly, I want to make a more speculative suggestion. Admittedly, little that Hume says suggests that he foresaw this option, but it appears to fit his views. It is that the rules of the understanding can function as 'second-order' rules, rules that have 'first-order' rules of the imagination for their subject. That is, the understanding could form a rule such as 'it is invalid to infer from "*x*'s are generally P" to "this particular *x* is P"'. By forming such logical principles and "enlivening" them to the imagination through habituation and practice, it seems they could also function much like the causal rules in counteracting particular prejudiced inferences.

This sketch of the distinction between the two kinds of general rules will have to suffice here. On this interpretation, Hume's theory remains deterministic: the "second influence" of the general rules occurs with the same causal necessity as the "first", even though the mind is more conscious of the former than the latter. The mind is able to correct (some of) its prejudices because it has been taught, or has taught itself, the general rules of the understanding, and has habituated itself into using them. That this process is mostly involuntary is suggested by this passage: "Sometimes the one [kind of rule], sometimes the other prevails, according to the disposition and character of the person. The vulgar are commonly guided by the first, and wise men by the second." (T

1.3.13.12/102) By stressing the role of the person's "disposition" and "character", Hume appears to say that whether an individual is able to overcome prejudice depends less on their will in the moment than on whether they have correctly internalized the general rules of the "wise" and unprejudiced.[17] This deterministic view of the correction of prejudices also opens it up to external, structural influences, as we will now see.

4. Structural prejudice

The account of prejudice in *Treatise* 1.3.13 is presented in seemingly individualistic terms. It relies on a cognitive mechanism – the formation of general rules – that occurs in individual minds. Although its suggestions for correcting prejudice include room for education (hence for a social influence on prejudice), Hume does not develop this thought and instead presents the theory in a way that appears centered on the individual. It is the individual themselves who has to internalize the general rules of the understanding that can correct prejudices.

Such an individualist explanation has obvious limitations, however. Hume's examples are cases of group prejudice that clearly are not the result of individuals' independent observation, but have been socially caused. They are examples of structural ignorance. Although Hume's prejudices seem to depend on agents' cognitive processes – meaning that, in Martín's terms, they are manifestations of "cognitive" not "structural" structural ignorance – they nevertheless have to be explained by reference to social mechanisms of transmission. Unless he can recognize such

[17] For an alternative, voluntarist interpretation of the theory of general rules, see Hickerson (2013).

mechanisms, Hume is at risk of exemplifying Mills's accusation of being "inimical" to the structural causes of ignorance.

However, Hume evidently is aware of these social factors. His choice of example already hints at them. For example, assuming that we are prejudiced against the Irish, what makes Irishness salient for us in determining whether someone is witty or not? The first question to ask here is: *who* thinks that the Irish have no wit and the French no solidity? The answer is clear: it is the British. They are the ones who both border the French and Irish and have historically had much interaction with them. Secondly, *why* do they think this? Put in individualist terms, Hume's explanation would seem to be that, to the extent that they have this prejudice, it is because they have individually interacted with Irish and French people and formed their generalizations on the basis of this experience. It is their individual experience with boorish Irish and unreliable French people that has caused them to become prejudiced. But put like this, the explanation is hardly believable, and the importance that the national character of the British seems to play in generating the prejudices under discussion suggests that Hume himself is aware that more than just individual features are at play. In fact, in the same paragraph where he introduces the notion of prejudice, he is working to convince his British audience that they, too, can be prejudiced. He writes, recall, that "Human nature is very subject to errors of this kind; and perhaps this nation as much as any other." A plausible conjecture is that Hume chose his particular examples precisely because he knew they were prejudices of his British readership.

This shows that Hume was at least implicitly aware that social factors influence prejudice. Moreover, there are examples from other texts – including, especially, "Of National Characters" – that show Hume's awareness of the social side of prejudice and that support expanding the theory. I have already cited Hume's claim that the English are naturally thought to be more knowledgeable

than Danes. Although Hume does not explain why he thinks this puzzling claim is true, it shows that he thinks that a structural factor like one's nationality can have epistemic influences. The Danes are structurally more ignorant than the English in virtue of their nationality.

How can Hume explain such structural influences? There is no space here to present a full discussion of this question; instead I will only indicate some pointers, consistent with my aim in the paper of showing *that* Hume recognizes structural ignorance. There seem to be two ways in which Hume can theorize structural influences on prejudice: one of these relates to the *correction* of prejudices and the other to their *formation*. Firstly, and as I hinted in the previous section, structural features can influence, and can either enhance or constrain, our ability to correct our prejudices. So, education can help us to become better at reflecting on the general rules that we use, and this can make us more circumspect when we draw inferences from them. But it is, of course, not just education that can play this role. Especially in his essays, Hume places great emphasis on the role that "civilization" plays in the overcoming of prejudice. Essays like "Of Refinement in the Arts," "Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences" and "Of Commerce" discuss the ways in which knowledge, morality and taste depend on the social structures and institutions of a society. A central theme is that the growth of a commercial society increases the amount of interaction between different groups of people – Hume frequently praises the importance of "conversation" – and in this way can help members of this society to attain a more cosmopolitan point of view.[18] In a more civilized society, it is easier not just to meet with people from other backgrounds, but also to see their manufactures and their cultural expressions. This process helps to correct prejudices,

[18] See McArthur (2014) on Hume's cosmopolitanism and Taylor (2015, 122-5) and O'Brien (2022, 108-13) on the importance of conversation to Hume's moral theory.

not by leading people to suspend their general rules, but by making these rules more precise and by making us more judicious in drawing inferences from them.

As an example, we can take the role that labor plays in this process. In several writings, Hume stresses the role of "industry" in the growth of civilization.[19] Industry is a person's or society's capacity for intentionally and intelligently exerting themselves in any productive activity (not necessarily physical labor). In "Of National Characters", Hume notes that "poverty and hard labour debase the minds of the common people, and render them unfit for any science and ingenious profession".[20] Being overworked limits people's ability to develop their minds and, as a consequence, to correct their prejudices. Already in the *Treatise*, Hume notes that a "day-labourer" has different "sentiments, actions and manners" from a "man of quality" (T 2.3.1.9/259). This is a negative example of Hume's claim that "*industry*, *knowledge*, and *humanity* are linked together by an indissoluble chain" (RA 5/EMPL 271): while industry usually indicates for Hume an ability to overcome one's natural conditions so as to construct better, civil ones,[21] here this virtuous connection breaks down from being pushed too far. For present purposes, it is important to note the role that one's structural position in society – are you a "day-labourer" or a "man of quality"? – influences, for Hume, the extent to which you can be expected to be capable of overcoming your

[19] On industry and its relation to Hume's political economy and moral theory, see Skinner (2008) and Wennerlind (2011).

[20] NC 3/EMPL 198. Hume draws an interesting parallel between this case and that of an oppressive government, which has a similar effect on its citizens. Elsewhere, Hume notes that "indolence" – the opposite of industry – plays an important role in human happiness, but only because "like sleep, [it] is requisite as an indulgence to the weakness of human nature, which cannot support an uninterrupted course of business or pleasure." (RA 3/EMPL 270)

[21] See, e.g., EPM 3.13/87: "Few enjoyments are given us from the open and liberal hand of nature; but by art, labour, and industry, we can extract them in great abundance."

prejudices. Just as industry and knowledge can form a self-perpetuating, virtuous spiral towards greater civilization, it seems that being overworked can also generate a self-perpetuating ignorance and moral backwardness for Hume. Additionally, it goes without saying that, if some groups were found to be naturally incapable of industry (as black people are stated to be in the racist footnote), or even if they were naturally *less* capable of it than other groups (cf. OC 21/EMPL 267), then this would have serious consequences for their susceptibility to moral causes and could even exclude them from civilization entirely.

The second structural influence on prejudice acts by shaping which general rules we form in the first place. To incorporate this dimension of the problem, it is necessary to deviate from Hume's usage of the term, by including both the general rules themselves as well as the inferences based on them under the heading of 'prejudice'. Although we saw that Hume does not think that the formation of general rules is itself prejudiced, he is all the same aware that this process can be shaped by external factors in various ways.

The major factor here is the operation of resemblance between people. Several authors have recently pointed out the role that sympathy plays for Hume in opening up the mind to social influences (or, stronger, in making the mind itself constitutively depend on its relation to others).[22] Sympathy is the process whereby we pre-reflectively take over other people's mental states, or "receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to our own" (T 2.1.11.2/206). Hume states that "[t]he human mind is of a very imitative nature; nor is it possible for any set of men to converse often together, without acquiring a similitude of manners, and communicating to each other their vices as well as virtues." (NC 9/EMPL

[22] See Taylor (2015), O'Brien (2022, chap. 4) and, for the latter view, Lenz (2022, chap. 3).

202) Here, again, conversation is said to be a motor of civilization and moral improvement. But what underlies it is humans' natural sympathy for each other, which leads them to "imitate" others' beliefs and behaviors. Sympathy operates on the basis of the general associative principles of the mind – the same principles that are at play in the formation of general rules. For this reason, we sympathize more with those people who resemble us and who we interact with often.

Ironically, Hume's possibly most explicit example of the role of resemblance in generating national characters turns on its *absence* between two groups. The example involves a supposed contrast between the manners of the Greeks and the Turks:

> Where any accident, as a difference in language or religion, keeps two nations, inhabiting the same country, from mixing with each other, they will preserve, during several centuries, a distinct and even opposite set of manners. The integrity, gravity, and bravery of the Turks, form an exact contrast to the deceit, levity, and cowardice of the modern Greeks. (NC 15/EMPL 205)

Here, the character of either nationality is said to be structurally informed by the fact that it neighbors the other. This process will naturally involve the prejudices of both groups. The Turkish, having formed the general rule "the Greeks are deceitful", form their own manners in opposition to them. Similarly, the Greeks may think "the Turks are too serious" and develop their own "levity" in response. Hume seems to imply that any observable difference in appearance or behavior between the two groups – any lack of resemblance – can become the occasion for the formation of prejudices.

This shows one structural effect on prejudice of the operation of resemblance (or its lack). It is of course easy to think of other ways that unequally distributed sympathy can give rise to prejudice.

It should be noted that Hume is well aware of this problem: it is central to his ethical thought, where it is discussed under the heading of the natural "partiality" of the mind. Hume's moral theory revolves around the attempt to coordinate people's particular sympathies so that they conform to impersonal moral standards. However, on Hume's theory, it appears that prejudice is never entirely eradicable. The operation of the general rules of the imagination is automatic and natural. It can only be, to some extent, retroactively corrected, but never entirely prevented. If people are necessarily and ineradicably prejudiced, it seems they can never fully conform to impersonal moral standards. Hume appears to be willing to embrace this feature of his views in the *Treatise* (see, e.g., T 3.3.3.2/385), but his later dissatisfaction with this view is suggested by the strong emphasis put in the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* on a "sentiment of humanity" that is universal in the double sense that everyone has it and that it extends to all people (see EPM 9.5/74). From a critical epistemological perspective, here again there is a telling interplay between Hume's views on the unity of the human species and his views about morality and knowledge. For example, if it were to turn out that there were natural variations in the strength (or even the presence) of the sentiment of humanity across human groups, this would have immediate consequences for these groups' moral abilities, as well as the obligations of other groups towards them.[23]

[23] For discussion of some of the issues raised in this paragraph, see e.g. Garrett (2004), Garrett and Sebastiani (2017), McArthur (2014) and Taylor (2013). See Eze (2000) for a discussion of the starkest possible implications of Hume's racial thinking for his morality and politics.

5. Concluding remarks: Hume, a structural epistemologist?

To summarize, two things have become clear about Hume's theory of prejudice. On the one hand, Hume has a surprisingly rich account of the structural influences on the formation and possibilities for correction of prejudice. These go beyond the social influences on belief that are already well-attested in Hume scholarship to proposals about the actual structural conditions under which prejudices grow in society, and how the development of society can lead to a reduction in prejudice (without ever entirely eradicating it). Prejudices result from general rules that have not (yet) been corrected. So they are influenced, first, by the contents of our past experiences (and by the things we have not experienced). Second, they are also influenced by habits of association that are due to local "custom" (like the beliefs the Greeks and the Turks have about each other). It is easy to see how social structures can *limit*, *narrow* and *bias* experience, producing prejudice. They *limit* experience because they constrain the experiences we have within certain boundaries. For example, French people may be segregated from British people in a way that fuels the latter's prejudices, by preventing them from having a fuller experience of the former; or laborers and the poor may be deprived of opportunities to expand their views. Social structures can also *narrow* experience, by restricting the range of things people become conscious of in the experiences they do have. So, if custom has taught us to mistrust the "deceitful" Greeks, this general rule may so dominate our interaction with them that we overlook many properties that they instantiate. Finally, social structures can *bias* experience, distorting it to the point where we do not just fail to see things that are there, but think we see things that are not there. Hume's own examples emphasize this: operating on the prejudice that the Irish are not witty, we fail to recognize the funny Irish person in front of us. Notably, prejudice can for Hume be both group-based, self-perpetuating and implicit (those who are prejudiced need not be aware that they are prejudiced, and may not even recognize some

of their prejudices). These are three features his theory has in common with Mills's theory of structural ignorance.

The starting point of this paper was the question how critical projects in contemporary social epistemology relate to their history. Hume, I have now argued, complicates the assumption that is made by Charles Mills, among others, that "mainstream" epistemology has historically been hostile to such projects, because Hume's epistemology is clearly open to structural influences. These include, through his observations on industry and the operations of sympathy, the role of (to repeat Annette Baier's term) authority structures. This is an important result that suggests that the history of critical social epistemology may be more complex and multi-faceted, and also longer, than is usually thought. At the same time, despite these similarities, the differences between Hume's and Mills's understandings of structural ignorance should not be ignored. I will end by briefly stressing two points of divergence.

First, although Hume recognizes the role of structural features in the perpetuation of ignorance and accepts that prejudice arises as a result of basic features of human cognition and sociality, rendering it ultimately less than fully ineradicable, he is also sanguine about the possibility of societal progress. For him, industry and culture together drive the overcoming of prejudice just as they drive the development of society itself. On inspection, however, this attitude is applied only selectively: Hume's racial views on the one hand appear to exclude black people from this process of development, and on the other make racial prejudices toward them appear well-founded and not in need of correction. His "natural" distinction between races, in a system that otherwise depends heavily on distinctions deriving from "custom" alone, places strict limits on the universality of his moral and epistemological views.

The second, related point is that Hume's theory of structural ignorance is not a theory of racial ignorance. It is not, for the reason that Hume, being a racist himself, could hardly have developed what Mills calls a "racial epistemology" (Mills 2007, 17). As Mills understands the term, a racial epistemology is an epistemology that can explain how racial differences structurally influence cognition, on the part of both the perpetrators and victims of racism. A key starting point of such an epistemology is that these racial differences are themselves socially constructed (result from a "racial contract", in the terms of Mills 1997; see also Mills 2007, 20). After all, an epistemology that took racial differences as natural and causative of differences in cognition would not be a racial epistemology but simply a racist one. As we saw, Hume denies that race is socially constructed, and this prevents him from developing a racial epistemology – i.e., from applying his theory of prejudice to racial prejudices. To be clear, I have also argued that this is a flaw on Hume's part. Hume's racist beliefs are themselves prejudiced (in the common, modern sense of the term); he ought to have seen that and rejected them. As a matter of fact, however, he did not. It is important to recognize this, in order to avoid what would be a misguided attempt to sanitize Hume's thought or present him as more egalitarian than he really is.[24]

Accordingly, the paper has instead made the weaker claim that Hume has an epistemology of structural ignorance, which includes 'social' ignorance of particular groups. It seems to me clear that a modern reader should be able to combine this theory with a social constructivist view of race and hence derive a racial epistemology on Humean basis. However, to repeat, such an attempt would go against Hume's own wishes. Mills said that mainstream epistemology was "profoundly inimical" to the development of theories of social ignorance. This paper has shown that in Hume's

[24] Willis (2019) discusses this point particularly clearly. See Mills (2005b) for an analogous discussion of how Kant's racist beliefs need to be acknowledged as an intrinsic part of his philosophy.

case, it was not so much his epistemology that was inimical to this as Hume himself. Hume's personal racist beliefs – themselves in turn structurally influenced by his historical, sociocultural position – prevented him from adequately understanding the depths of his own ignorance. Nevertheless, his epistemology was in principle flexible enough to allow him to do so.

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