Hume on “National Characters”

The debate over national characters in the Modern era concerned the ways by which we can understand the differences in manners and human characters exhibited by different cultures. It was a debate riddled with errors and prejudices regarding the understanding of grouping together the members of a nation according to the same common characteristics and uniformities. Nevertheless, the Enlightenment in particular was a century that contributed to an opening towards other cultures, something Voltaire particularly highlighted when he referred to Eastern cultures. The concept of national identity, linked to cultural and ethnic identity, was particularly discussed by philosophers and thinkers in the 18th century when they pondered on the issue of national characters and whether they are shaped by natural or moral causes.

When talking of the “national character” of a people we mean the typical features that characterise them, primarily mentality and cultural features, as well as patterns of behaviour that distinguish them from other peoples, neighbouring or far away. It is generally accepted that Greeks, Romans, English, Russians, Spanish, Jews, Chinese and other peoples have a “national character”, which is shaped by certain features that distinguish them from another nation or even from their distant ancestors, such as in the case of the modern Greeks and Italians. From Antiquity to the Modern era it has been noticed that there are differences in behaviour and character between Asians and Europeans, Northerners and Southerners, Negros and whites or between neighbouring peoples attributed to physical and moral causes. The question about the formation and differences of “national characters”, which is connected to the question about the rise and progress of fine arts was posed in Antiquity by Hippocrates, Strabo, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Plutarch, to mention only some of the Ancient thinkers, but also in Modern times by many philosophers and scientists, such as Jean Bodin, F. Bacon, Thomas Sprat, William Temple, J. Dryden, Thomas Blackwell, as well as the French Dominique Bouhours and St. Evremond, or l’ Abbé Dubos, Fontanelle, Marmontel, Vico, philosophers who tried to examine the causes of the progress and fall of the
nations as well as of the rise and progress of the arts and sciences in relation to physical and moral causes.

David Hume seems to be particularly interested in theories emphasising the importance of climate to the formation of national characters as well as to the rise and the development of the arts from one nation to the other.¹ In his well-known essay entitled “Of National Characters”, published in 1748, he distinguished natural causes, such as climate and environmental conditions, from moral ones, which are custom, education, economic development and form of government, in other words the political and social conditions that shape a particular region. In this essay Hume argued that the character of a nation is influenced not by physical but, primarily, by moral causes in the same way that the individuals who comprise a nation are influenced. One needs to point out that Hume’s criticism to theories of physical causes is indirectly connected with his endeavour to explain the “rise and progress of the arts” and directly with the explanation of the particular character of the different people and nations. So, his essay “Of National Characters”, published in 1748, has to be examine in comparison with his essays “Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences”, “Of Eloquence” and “Of Civic Liberty’ that have been published earlier in the year 1842.

In what follows I will focus on issues of nationality that Hume discusses. In his Treatise of the Human Nature Hume describes the society as “a nation” and repeatedly notes that our nationalities make a difference to us most notably in the phenomenon of “national characters”.² According to Hume, a nation is “a collection of individuals”, that have national affiliations, whose manners “are frequently determined by moral causes”.³ In discussing qualities such as sharpness of mind, generosity, gaiety, or the warlike nature of different nations of Ancient and Modern times, Hume was to connect the national self with the “national characters” and with the fact that people of the same nationality have the tendency to behave in the same way. Although he felt, as did many Scottish intellectuals, particularly anxious over

issues relating to nationality and, above all, Scotland’s position in a united Britain under English Rule,⁴ he nonetheless did not mention openly in his essay “Of National Characters” those keywords upon which each nationalist ideology is founded, such as language, religion, customs, traditions and art, which are considered to be criteria in the national identity of a people or a nation, words which give meaning to national diversity and legitimise the cultural specificity of a people or a nation in comparison and in contrast with other peoples or nations. Hume repeated in both the Treatise of Human Nature and his essay “On National Characters,” which is grouped with his historical works, the claim that each of us has a national character and, at the same time, a variety of individualised characteristics.⁵ When he discusses national characters in the Treatise, initially dismisses them as “rash”, “errors” and as the result of “prejudice”⁶, but latter he points out that observation of uniformities, “the very essence of necessity” force us to think in terms of them.⁷ The same tension appears in the opening paragraph of “Of National Characters” where Hume points out that the “vulgar” overstate the force of national characters, while the “men of sense” are “prudent when they use them to form an initial assessment of strangers”.

More specifically, at the beginning of his essay, Hume recognises that the common people tend to express extreme views on national characters, arguing that they believe “that any people are knavish, or cowardly, or ignorant, and will admit of no exception, but comprehend every individual under the same censure”. However, he points out that: “Men of sense condemn these undistinguishing judgments; though at the same time, they allow, that each nation has a peculiar set of manners, and that some particular qualities are more frequently to be met with among one people than among their neighbours”. He continues his argument stating that the men of sense believe that “The common people in SWITZERLAND have probably more honesty than those of the same rank in IRELAND; and every prudent man will, from that circumstance alone, make a difference in the trust which he reposes in each. We have reason to expect greater wit and gaiety in a FRENCHMAN than in a SPANIARD; though CERVANTES was born in SPAIN. An ENGLISHMAN will naturally be supposed to have more knowledge than a DANE; though TYCHO BRAHE was a

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⁵ Essays, 203 and Treatise, 403.  
⁶ Treatise, 146-47.  
⁷ Ibid., 403.
native of DENMARK”.\(^8\) Even though Hume generally rejects the conceptions we have of the “national characters” as “deceit” and the result of “prejudice”,\(^9\) he ultimately accepts that the existence of similarities that can be found within nations enables us to think in a similar fashion to the common people,\(^10\) and to attribute specific qualities to certain nations, qualities that he does not believe are the result of the climate and the winds, as had been excessively emphasised from Antiquity until his time, but due to custom, education, and the form of government. He would go even further in his essay and comment upon the characteristics of the peoples of Antiquity, such as Greek, Roman, Chinese or Jewish, and sometimes make comparisons between them and other peoples, like the Turkish, Spanish or Icelandic ones, and emphasise more generally that the reasons given for national characters are explained sometimes by physical and other times by moral causes: “Different reasons are assigned for these national characters; while some account for them from moral, others from physical causes. By moral causes, I mean 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. Of this kind are, the nature of the government, the revolutions of public affairs, or penury in which the people live, the situation of the nation with regard to its neighbours, and such like circumstances. By physical causes I mean 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, which, though reflection and reason may sometimes overcome it, will yet prevail among the generality of mankind, and have an influence on their manners.”\(^11\)

Hume appears to have known of the famous theory of Hippocrates and his School, according to which the natural environment and its qualities, primarily air and climate, shape people’s character. He seems to criticise this theory, although he does not refer to it directly, while citing Strabo, according to whom the most arts and spiritual qualities could flourish in any climate and their progress depended on moral causes. Hippocrates certainly mentions climatic differences between Asian and European countries and correlates them with the peculiarities of their inhabitants, pointing to the joylessness and unmanliness of the people of Asia, describing them as

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\(^{8}\) *Essays*, p. 198.
\(^{9}\) *Treatise*, pp. 146-147.
\(^{10}\) *Treatise*, p. 403.
\(^{11}\) *Essays*, p. 199.
gentler and unwarlike in comparison with the Europeans, who are more spirited, although he does not seem to overlook the moral causes that also shape them.\textsuperscript{12}

Hume seems to be familiar with a wide literature connected with the role of climate in the formation of the arts and the national characters, referring to opinions about the character traits that differentiate Asian and Europeans, or people from the North and the South. However, he is convinced that there are the moral causes that determine the differences in both national and individual characters, as he clearly notes: “As poverty and hard labour debase the minds of the common people, and render them unfit for any science and ingenious profession; so where any government becomes very oppressive to all its subjects, it must have a proportional effect on their temper and genius, and must banish all the liberal arts from among them.” He continues by arguing that the character of persons that follow some professions is shaped by moral causes that have the power to change the natural disposition and the personality of these persons: “Moral causes fix the character of different professions and alter even that disposition, which the particular members receive from the hand of nature. A soldier and a priest are different characters, in all nations, and all ages; and this difference is founded on circumstances, whose operation is eternal and unalterable”.\textsuperscript{13} Regarding soldiers, he claims that, “The uncertainty of their life makes them lavish and generous, as well as brave: Their idleness, together with the large societies, which they form in camps or garrisons, inclines them to pleasure and gallantry: by their frequent change of company, they acquire good breeding and an openness of behaviour: Being employed only against a public and an open enemy, they become candid, honest, and undesigning: And as they use more the labour of the body than that of the mind, they are commonly thoughtless and ignorant.”\textsuperscript{14} As for the priests, he acknowledges the truth of “the maxim that the priests of all religions are the same” and points out that the character of this profession prevails over their personal character and way of life, as having been elevated above humanity, priests acquire a uniform character.\textsuperscript{15}


\textsuperscript{13} Op. Cit., p. 198.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p. 199.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
Hume’s argument – according to which national characters are not determined by the effects of air or climate but mainly by moral causes, such as education and custom, as well as the form of government – resorts to experience and history. Of the many observations he makes on the peoples of Antiquity and of his contemporary reality, I will focus my attention on what he says about the Ancient and the Modern Greeks. He first argues that, in small neighbouring polities, where environmental differences do not exist, people have different characteristics and can be as different in their manners as with the most distant nations. He thus turns to the examples of the Athenians, who were famed for being ingenious, polite and gay, and the Thebans, who were known for being dull, simple and cold: “In small governments, which are contiguous, the people have notwithstanding a different character, and are often as distinguishable in their manners as the most distant nations. ATHENS and THEBES were but a short day’s journey from each other; though the ATHENIANS were as remarkable for ingenuity, politeness, and gaiety, as the THEBANS for dulness, rusticity, and a phlegmatic temper”.\(^{16}\) Citing the Ancient geographer Strabo, who in Book II of his *Geography* (2.3.7) rejected wholesale the influence of climate upon both men and animals, Hume points out that Strabo argued that: “It is not from nature that the ATHENIANS are learned, the LACEDEMONIANS ignorant, and the THEBANS too, who are still nearer neighbours to the former. Even the difference of animals [Strabo adds] depends not on climate”.\(^{17}\) Hume then makes comparisons between different peoples, in relation to moral causes, and documents various cases which he believes confirm his positions. Thus, in comparing the Modern Greeks and the Turks, he argues that, “The integrity, gravity, and bravery of the TURKS, form an exact contrast to the deceit, levity, and cowardice of the Modern GREEKS”,\(^{18}\) in order to support his view that “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.”\(^{19}\) He supports his conviction that the manners of a people change considerably from one age to another due to changes in their government, the intermarriage with new people or the general inconstancy to which all human affairs are subject, by comparing the Ancient with the Modern Greeks says: “The ingenuity, industry, and activity of the Ancient Greeks

\(^{19}\) *Ibid.*
have nothing in common with the stupidity and indolence of the present inhabitants of those regions.”

I will focus on Hume’s opinion cited above regarding the differences of moral and personal qualities of Ancient and Modern Greeks who in the above quotation are named as “the present inhabitants of those regions”. We know that Hume’s *Essays* and his *History of England* were received warmly in Britain and on the Continent, and continued to be read widely for more than a century after his death. *The History of England* as well as the *Essays* seemed to attract the interest of the pre-revolutionary Greeks who lived abroad, who in the first decades of the 19th century made particular mention of his “Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations” and “Of National Characters” and of the *History of England*. The widely respected and eminent classicist and political theorist Adamantios Korais (1748-1833), a Greek enlightener who devoted his life to editing, annotating and translating into French or Modern Greek the Ancient and Modern medical, philosophical and literary texts for the benefit of his countrymen living under foreign Rule, cites Hume in his *Discours Préliminaire sur le Traité d’ Hippocrate ‘Des airs, des eaux et des lieux’*. Korais published this work in Paris in 1800 in the hope of benefiting not only doctors, but also historians, cosmographers and politicians. In his *Discours Préliminaire*, Korais discusses the influence of climate on man and mentions Hume’s essay “Of National Characters”, particularly his view that differences between peoples derive more from “moral causes” such as governments, than from “physical causes”. Korais himself thought that both physical and moral causes influence peoples, and he rejected

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Hume’s views about the uniformity of character of Chinese and Jews, even though they lived under different geographical conditions, as Hume says in his Essay. Curiously enough, Korais does not criticise Hume’s views on the national character of the Ancient and Modern Greeks neither their comparison with the Turks, and he cites it only to argue against physical causes, noting that Hume misread Strabo in his efforts to deny the influence of climate, since Strabo held that physical and moral causes influenced man equally. On the other hand, Evangelos Papanoutsos (1900-1982), a contemporary Greek philosopher and translator of Hume’s Essays, seems to have been the first to comment, in footnotes, on Hume’s opinions of the national character of the Modern Greeks, stating that he will not comment on Hume’s view because these criticisms were common among Europeans of the time who had no first hand knowledge of the character of Modern Greeks. I would like to point out here that in the 18th and 19th centuries European intellectuals were feeling enthusiasm and expressed admiration for Ancient Greece and its achievements, while they had a vague idea of the Greek territories of their own day. Modern Greece was for the most of them a backward and uninviting country, which had lost its liberties and seemed more deserving of pity than of admiration. Most of them were not sharing the hopes of the philhellenes that the Greek revolution would mark the real beginning of Greek regeneration. In addition, during the Enlightenment, overseas exploration and discoveries worked to undermine Western self-assurance and complacency. The Chinese had a society that seemed admirable in many ways even if it was not Christian. What Voltaire found in the Chinese, other thinkers found in real or imagined others that constituted the Asian diversity. China, considered as ‘oriental’,


became a separate object of study due to rapid information about it. For most Europeans the essential ‘Orient’ narrowed itself to the Ottoman Empire, Persia and Mughal India and ‘Orientals’ were by definition Muslims, endowed with cultures that seemed to have much in common. Real or imagined voyages flourished in the works of such philosophers like Bernard de Fontenelle, the chevalier Ramsay, Denis Diderot, Constantin-Francois de Volney. Works like the letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, detailing a trip to Constantinople, encouraged a tolerance of others and a new willingness to accept innovations from them. Many Europeans appreciated the luxury of the East and especially that of the Ottoman Empire which in their minds was the “other”, the different”, mostly because of its different culture, customs, arts, and music; the “alla turca style” was à la mode in some European musical works and had attracted the European imagination in artistic affairs depending on the political relations of Europeans with the Ottoman Empire. Muhammad was shown at that time as a major figure in secular history with heroic characteristics, and not as an impostor able to chastise erring Christians.

Hume appears to have great appreciation for the Turks, as he notes that “The ancient ROMANS seem to have been a candid sincere people, as are the modern TURKS.” He also appreciated the English more than his fellow Scots: “the ENGLISH are the most remarkable of any people that perhaps ever were in the world. Nor is this to be ascribed to the mutability and uncertainty of their climate, or any other physical causes; since all these causes take place in the neighbouring country of SCOTLAND, without having the same effect.” On the other hand he compares the English to the Ancient Greeks: “Who can doubt, but the ENGLISH are at present a more polite and knowing people than the GREEKS were for several ages after the siege of TROY? Yet is there no comparison between the languages of MILTON and that of HOMER”. Emphasising the value of democratic government that is connected with the progress of the peoples and the arts, he notes that national groups, for example the ancient Greeks, who lived in different climatic and cultural environments and in the same space, had different characteristics, such as the Athenians, the Lacedemonians and the Thebans did. Hume explains, by using moral arguments, differences caused by imitation of foreign habits mentioning the soldiers

26 “Of National Characters”, 211.
27 Ibid., 207.
28 Ibid., 209.
of Alexander who changed their behaviour and became, for example, debauched and drinkers, when they imitated the Persians, although he admits that in their case we have to take under consideration the geographical and physical causes.\textsuperscript{29} That is apparent when he speaks about the democratic polities of Ancient Greece that made possible the rise and progress of arts and philosophy, when he states, noticing the importance of cultural factors such as language and religion as well as the importance of the climate and geographical place in his essay “Of the rise and progress of arts and sciences” that “GREECE was a cluster of little principalities, which soon became republics: and being united both by their neighbourhood, and by the ties of the same language and interest, they entered into the closest intercourse of commerce and learning. There concurred a happy climate, a soil not unfertile, and a most harmonious and comprehensive language; so that every circumstance among the people seemed to favour the rise of the arts and sciences. Each city produced its several artists and philosophers, who refused to yield the preference to those of the neighbouring republics…”\textsuperscript{30}

Hume turns primarily against the Abbé Dubos, who argued for the importance of natural causes in the formation of national character, mentioning two moral causes, the “fixed” and the “accidental”.\textsuperscript{31} The former is connected to the government of a society and with specific professions, such as the priesthood, but these are not fixed for the national self, which is also influenced by accidental causes, such as an important historical figure or the feeling of sympathy. It seems that he knew the views of Greek and Roman authors, like Hippocrates, Strabo, Caesar and Livy, as well as those of the Europeans, such as the Abbé Dubos,\textsuperscript{32} Montesquieu,\textsuperscript{33} and Malebranche,\textsuperscript{34} who gives his version of the climate theory linking it to the debate over national characters, or Fondenelle;\textsuperscript{35} all these thinkers had endorsed the idea that climate has a significant effect on character and shapes the national characters

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., p. 214.
\textsuperscript{30} “The Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences” in Essays, op. cit., pp. 120-121.
\textsuperscript{31} “Of National Characters”, op. cit., p. 203.
\textsuperscript{33} Charles-Luis Secondat, baron de Montesquieu, The Spirit of the Laws (1748), translated by A.M.Cohler, B.C. Miller, and H. Stone, Part 3, Cambridge-Cambridge University Press, 1989. It was an extremely influential work in the history of political theory and sociology, in which he analyzed different forms of government and developed his theory of the influence of climate on political and social organization. This work established him as a leading figure in the intellectual circles of France.
\textsuperscript{34} Nicolas Malebranche, The Search After Truth (1674-75), translated by T. M. Lemon and Paul J. Oscamp, Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1980, 94-95.
\textsuperscript{35} Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle, Digression sur les anciens et les modernes (1688)
although the latter had also stressed the importance of the historical and social environment in the formation of the cultural and intellectual achievements of an era. Hume also knew Bolingbroke, who stressed the importance of education, custom and example in the formation of national characters\footnote{Henry Saint John Bolingbroke, \textit{Letters on the Study and Use of History} (1752), Works, eed. by D. Mallet, Hildesheim, 1968, vol. II, pp. 292 ff.} as well as G. Turnbull,\footnote{George Turnbull, \textit{A Treatise on Ancient Painting, Containing Observations on the Rise, Progress and Decline of that Art...}, printed by the author and sold by A. Millar, MDCCXL.} thinkers who pointed out the role of good education in the flourishing of arts and sciences, or the Scottish classical scholar Thomas Blackwell,\footnote{Thomas Blackwell, \textit{An Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer} (1735), Hildesheim-New York, 1976.} who, although considered as very important the role of the moral causes in the flourishing of the human spirit, he used widely the theory of climate in order to explain the formation of a genius such as Homer. Hume, being in favour of moral causes, also mentions in his \textit{Essay} the role of forms of government in determining national character, although he states that Scotland and England both come under the same government although they have distinct national characters,\footnote{“Of National Characters”, pp. 202n, 207.} something that is absent in his first treatment of the issue in the \textit{Treatise}.\footnote{\textit{Treatise}, pp. 316-17.} Moreover, in \textit{The History of England} he says that the determination of the form of government depends in part on the character of the people.\footnote{\textit{The History of England}, edited by William B. Todd, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987, vol. IV, App. iii, pp.384-5.} As far as this view goes, he notes that the activities required by a particular form of government will also affect its citizens’ behaviour. As he states, eloquence is part of the character of a nation with a “popular” government,\footnote{Ibid., p. 126.} and a character for superstition will often be associated with monarchies because it is in the interest of monarchs to promote reverence for religion as a means to bolster reverence for their own power.\footnote{The Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences” in \textit{Essays}, p. 119.} In the same essay Hume also observes mentioning Europe and particularly Greece in relation to geographical and environmental reasons that make possible the progress of arts and sciences that “EUROPE, of all the four parts of the world, is the most broken by seas, rivers, and mountains: and GREECE of all countries of EUROPE. Hence these regions were naturally divided into several distinct governments. And hence the sciences arose in GREECE; and EUROPE has
been hitherto the most constant habitation of them”. In addition, Hume also mentions Longinus and several other eminent writers, like Addison and Lord Shaftesbury, who asserted that the arts and sciences could never flourish but in a free government, and on other cases like Rome and Florence cities that during the Renaissance period had lost their liberty but had, nevertheless, lead to perfection all the fine arts. For him, the most eminent instance of the flourishing of learning in absolute governments was France which’s people, apart from the GREEKS, have been at once philosophers, poets, orators, historians, painters, architects, sculptors, and musicians. Regarding the politeness of manners in the Modern era, he thinks that it arose most naturally in monarchies and courts where the liberal arts flourished: “The republics in EUROPE are at present noted for want of politeness. The good-manners of a SWISS civilazed in HOLLAND, is an expression for rusticity among the FRENCH. The ENGLISH, in some degree, fall under the same censure, notwithstanding their learning and genius. And if the VENETIANS be an exception to the rule, they owe it, perhaps to their communication with the other ITALIANS, most of whose governments beget dependence more than sufficient for civilizing their manners”.

More generally, Hume believes, within the framework of his moral psychology, that “characters are the causes of actions and the objects of moral assessment; that is, we understand people’s actions by relating them to their characters, which in turn cause the moral sentiments.” He notes that we must distinguish between acts that are the result of the fact that we have grown up in a specific national culture, and those that are associated with the individual character and the personal self. Moreover, Hume argues, in reference to the national characters of different peoples, that the convictions we have formed on the differentiality between national characters lead us to making generalisations or to have misconceptions regarding someone’s behaviour, until we are able to get to know him as a character. So, given that the French have a national character for gaiety, when we find out that a happy person is French, we will see her happiness not so much as a

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44 Ibid., p. 123.
45 “On civil liberty” in Essays, p. 91.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid., p. 127.
49 Treatise, p. 575.
reflection of herself, but rather as a reflection of her nationality. Of course, Hume knows that causal generalisations often lead to mere prejudice, as we tend to link nationality with individual behaviour, and he argues that the “causal generalizations” which we make are usually marked by prejudice. Hume as a Scot often felt the force of vulgar misconceptions when in England, while he was more relaxed when in France where there was a less prejudiced attitude towards Scots. But, as far as the Modern Greeks go, it seems that he had a prejudiced attitude and not an open mind although he is convinced that openness of mind is the result of experiencing others by travelling and discovering what the different manners or characters of other nations are really like.

Arthur Schopenhauer in his *Aphorismen zur Lebensweisheit* points out that every living being lives as that which it is (“Von dem, was einer ist”), as that which it has (“Von dem, was einer hat”) and as that which represents to the others (“Von dem, was einer vorstellt”). Hume recognises that the differentiality typically associated with sympathy allows him to have sympathy with co-nationals and show less sympathy for foreigners in matters of justice, but we have to admit that his views on national characters and the national self of Modern Europeans are generalizations due to different sources and not accurate observations. We have also to add that when he speaks about Ancient nations he admits the importance of physical and environmental causes, but in the most of cases in his effort to point out the factors that have an influence on the development of the arts and the national characters he denies the view that physical environment could essentially determine it, so he refers to the historical and social environment. His explanations entail, from a methodological point of view, a negation of the physiological explanation and of the causal explanation as he notices that national characters or artistic affairs are often subject to accidental factors or to change. We have to admit that his interpretation of the national self and the arts is based on social institutions and collective forms of behaviour which show his linking of arts with the activity of a whole nation.

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50 See Donald C. Ainslie, “The problem of the National Self in Hume’s Theory of Justice”, p. 296-297.
52 Hume’s opinion on the national characteristics of Modern Greeks, as well as of the other southerners, reminds us of the criticism expressed towards contemporary Greeks (but also other Southerners like the Spanish, the Portuguese and the Italians but also the Irish; one should not forget the acronym PIIGS that was widely used at the start of the European fiscal and political crisis) are facing, especially by some German officials (but also by Greek pro-memorandum politicians for that matter) who accuse all Greeks as corrupted, liars and lazy people, a critique that could probably be attributed to a puritan morality and racial prejudices.
Hume uses “character” primarily to mean what we would call a “character trait” or a structured group of such traits that make up someone’s personality, that is “her character”, and accordingly, a “national character” consists of a set of characteristics for various qualities. As A. Baier indicates, a person might be said to have individual character traits for generosity, raillery, and tennis, a national character that includes courage and the love of liberty, and an admirable character, i.e. personality.\(^{53}\) It seems also that Hume’s views are connected with the so called “Ancient–Modern Controversy” over whether the intellectual culture of the Moderns was comparable with that of the Ancients, a controversy using either climatic or moral accounts of national characters in support of the views of partisans of both sides.\(^{54}\) Hume discusses the Ancient–Modern controversy in a number of his essays, mostly in “Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations” and “Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences” and provides us with clear views concerning important discussions of national characters of Ancient and Modern nations and states.

The subject of national characters is connected to the meanings of ethnicity and nation-states. Undoubtedly, in the 18\(^{th}\) and 19\(^{th}\) century, nations proved to be the great personalities of history and the particular characteristics of each one came to be seen not only as a result of the natural environment but, primarily, as a product of social, historical, intellectual, and political factors. When referring specifically on the subject of European cultural identity and the importance of national cultures in the progress and development of European civilisation, John Stuart Mill wrote characteristically: “What has made the European family of nations an improving, instead of a stationary portion of mankind? Not any superior excellence in them, which when it exists, exists as the effect, not as the cause; but their remarkable diversity of character and culture. Individuals, classes, nations, have been extremely unlike one another: they have struck out a great variety of paths, each leading to something valuable … Europe is, in my judgment, wholly indebted to this plurality of paths for its progressive and many-sided development.”\(^{55}\) Even though the 19\(^{th}\)

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century emphasised the importance of national cultures, it also supported the excellence of individuality and freedom of action and discouraged obedience to types. Even so, the Enlightenment was the century which made an opening to other cultures and heterogeneity, as Voltaire pointed out when talking of the civilisations of the East, such as the Chinese. He was the first to discuss the concept of differentiality as well as that of religious tolerance, which he saw not so much as a concept but as an outlook on life.

The concepts of identity and difference are a subject of research in contemporary cultural studies, and for this reason those who argue in favour of the construction of identity often base their arguments on a distinction between two forms or models of their production, in an attempt to make a historical rather than a theoretical distinction between identities. The first model presupposes that there exists a native and substantive content to each identity, which is determined by either a common descent or a common structure of experience or by both of these elements, and attempts to discover the “authentic” and “genuine” content of this identity. The second model denies the existence of separate or distinct identities, which are instead believed to be based on a universal common descent and experience. It argues that identities are always relative and incomplete during the process of their formation, so consequently identity is the opportunistic and unstable result of relations, which defines identities by emphasising the differences. Hume followed the Enlightenment attitude to the examination of the other, appreciating ‘ethnological’ traits. In between these opposing views, there are other approaches that lay greater emphasis on the historical and symbolic/cultural characteristics of national identity. All those who

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consider the ethnic group as a kind of cultural community that highlights the role of mythical descent and historical memories and makes it unrecognisable on the basis of one or more cultural differences, such as religion, customs, traditions, language and institutions,\textsuperscript{60} acknowledge that the elements of a common name, common descent, common historical memory, and one or many differentiated elements of a common culture create among the peoples a sense of solidarity, that is linked to the bond to a particular homeland.\textsuperscript{61}

Certainly, people tend to form communities that are \textit{racial}, as large families or social groups, to which are attributed unique, inherited biological characteristics, which supposedly define their intellectual traits; \textit{linguistic} communities, with the mother tongue helping to maintain the ties between people as members of a group with a common descent; and, \textit{cultural} communities, that is communities with common traditions, common ways and common forms of living. The unity of the community or the ethnic group, the people or the nation-state is, moreover, considered as being formed and stabilised through existing or actual enmities outwardly, while national identity is formed in time rather than place, deriving first and foremost in the past while national characters are certainly linked to both natural and moral causes.

\textsuperscript{61} \textit{Ibid.}