

RACE IN EARLY MODERN PHILOSOPHY

Justin Smith, *Nature, Human Nature, & Human Difference: Race in Early Modern Philosophy*
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The *ethos* of Justin Smith's *Nature, Human Nature, & Human Difference* is expressed in the narrative of Anton Wilhelm Amo (~1703-53), an African born slave who earned his doctoral degree in Philosophy at a European university and went on to teach at the Universities of Jena and Halle. Smith identifies Amo as a *time-marker* for diverging interpretations of race: race as inherently tethered to physical difference and race as inherited essential difference. Further, these interpretations of race are fastened to the discourse of science and human diversity within modern Europe. Smith's thesis maintains that the rise of the concept of race in philosophy begins with a divorcing of the soul from human nature and a movement to a naturalistic classification of human beings through taxonomies (e.g. botany, mineralogy and zoology), which dissolved into this dichotomy: an essential difference between people of reason and people of nature.

Smith's book can be divided into three sections: it begins with a historical ontology of race [Chapters 1-4], which culminates in degeneration [Chapter 5], and concludes by inquiring whether the concept of race, as having essential differences, is established during or after modernity [Chapter 6-9]. He situates Modern Racism (ethnic difference equals biological difference) and Liberal Racism (Eurocentrism) to demonstrate that race is a natural construction, "a sort of color-coded value judgment" (p.54), which is established in natural kind and essentialism. Or in Smith's words, essentialism "is some abstract standard by which to measure an individual being's degree of success or failure in its membership in a kind" (p.25). Hence, a historical ontology of race is necessary to prevent contemporaries from reading their modern construction of race back into history [Chapter 2]. Smith explains that during modernity, from Robert Burton (1577-1640) to Baruch Spinoza (1623-77), the most prevalent notion of human separation was derived from Hippocrates' (460-370BC) *Humoral View of Medicine*. Thus, it is one's humor (e.g. Black bile for Africans) that predisposes them to certain physical effects, but not essential effects. In a related vein, Smith uses Chapter 3 to examine the modernist methods used to separate themselves from Native Americans, which were based on the barbarian/civilization division from

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Antiquity. The modernist maintained that the Native American possessed *know-how* (i.e. skill) while the Europeans had *true knowledge* (i.e. reason). Europe was the archetype, but this did not necessitate that other human kinds were essentially different from Europeans. Despite the academic interest in nonessential differences, the Church fostered essential divisions based on humanity's origin, e.g., Voltaire's (1694-1778) *Polygenesis* and Isaac La Peyrère's (1596-1676) *Pre-Adamites*; however, these theories were never held by the majority [Chapter 4]. This section concludes with an explication of Matthew Hale's (1609-76) theory: separation of natural kinds came only through migration, which is crucial to Smith's section on degeneration.

Degeneration [Chapter 5] is the view that racial difference materializes when "a certain part of the species [takes] a wrong turn, or [is] knocked off of the established course set out for humanity at the beginning" (pp. 117-8). Degeneration presupposes a human 'norm', which when diverted produces deviations. These deviations occur in one of three ways: through *geography* by the change in climate and environment (Comte de Buffon 1707-1788), through culture by way of morals and practices (John Bulwer 1606-56), and through hybridism (e.g. *Orang-outang* by Edward Tyson: 1651-1708, and *apish-language* by Thomas Herbert: 1606-82). Degeneration does not claim that "different bodies *must* be underlain by minds or souls with a different set of nonphysical capacities that somehow match up with the physical differences" (p. 230). Rather, degeneration was used to make sense of the variations between different populations of human beings by ascribing geographically structured socio-cultural differences. Degeneration is the crux of Smith's argument and it clearly reveals how one might ascribe ethnicities; but Mary Floyd-Wilson asks, can degeneration divorce itself from the binary race relationship?¹ The last section of Smith's book inquires whether nonessential difference is the foundation of difference throughout modernity.

Before and during the majority of Amo's life, Smith exposes an interpretation of race (skin color) that does not tether race to essential differences; but soon after Amo's life, he begins to detect a liberal racism within modernity, which develops into our modern concept of race. Smith uses Bernier, Leibniz and Amo, among others, to unravel our modern understanding of race from that of the modernist, by explaining that these scholars are classifying nonessential differences [Chapter 6-7]. Smith describes Francois Bernier (1625-88) as only classifying racial difference geographically (by region). Leibniz, while engaging in the conversation on race and species, maintained that the only way to divide the world is linguistically, which he believed would give knowledge and not just know-how. As an addendum, Smith aims to characterize Amo as a Leibnizian, which is contingent. Amo, the African born slave turned European university professor, does not seem to have been racialized until the end of his time in Europe around 1750; Smith contends that Amo's departure from Europe runs parallel to a shift in the way Europeans speak about Africans, a movement from Moors to Negroes [Chapter 8].

At this linguistic transition [Chapter 9], we begin to see what Richard Popkin defined as Liberal Racism – or Eurocentrism, the view that Europe is the archetype toward which all other people should be striving; Smith avows that liberal racism does not necessitate an essential difference. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), while extremely

racist, saw Africans as deviations from the 'norm', and Smith asserts that his theories, which are non-racist, do not match the person who was explicitly racist. Smith describes Johann Herder (1744-1803) as acknowledging all races as being essentially the same with the only difference between human beings lying in culture and geography – both of which are best in Europe. Johann Blumenbach (1752-1840), for Smith, reiterates folk-taxonomy, placing Europe at the forefront; but also, he denies the claim that folk-taxonomy holds true. Smith's reading of these scholars seems generous, but I might be reading my contemporary perspective back into the conversation.

Smith concludes: "What is invented [in the Modern Period] is a system of racial typology, which in turn promotes a new way of talking about human diversity" (pp. 256-7). For Smith, the modern thinkers worked on systematizing nature, which led to artificial classifications and racial realism (i.e. scientific racism) but it did not produce the concept of race as inherited essential differences. He effortlessly exposes this systematization in early modern philosophy; then with the difficult figures, which appear after 1750, Smith ascribes their seemingly racial claims to *ad hoc* and *non sequitur* fallacies stemming from human differences. Explicated, Smith's research concerning the pre-Amo scholars was definitive and compelling, though his research of the post-Amo scholars was wanting in comparison, which can probably be attributed to book length. Amidst many of Smith's well-argued points, one inquiry relentlessly surfaces for me: if degeneration or Eurocentrism still functions as racism, then what is the difference between the early modern concept and today's contemporary concept? For the majority, the focus is not on essential difference, but the *function* of difference – be it: natural, physical or essential.

References

¹ Floyd-Wilson, M. *English Ethnicity and Race in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).