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## Wallis Simpson was Wrong

Remarks on Joshua Glasgow's A Theory of Race

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Joshua Glasgow has written a wonderful book on race (Glasgow 2009). Thoughtful, clear, and provocative, it advances the discussion in significant ways. Space is limited so I hope I can be excused for restricting my comments to Glasgow's assessment of my 2003 *Journal of Philosophy* analysis of the ordinary concept of race.<sup>1</sup> The last thing I would want to suggest is that this exhausts the interest of his book; for that is certainly not the case. My remarks can be regarded as testimony to just how stimulating his fine account is.

- I. According to the *Journal of Philosophy* account, the logical core of the ordinary concept of race is the concept of a group of human beings
  - H1. Who are distinguished from other human beings by visible physical features of the relevant kind
  - H2. Whose members are linked by common ancestry

and

H3. Who originate from a distinctive geographical location (442-7).

Glasgow likes the "thinness" of this account, its ascription of relatively few commitments to the ordinary concept of race, but thinks the account is not yet thin enough (Glasgow 2009, 18, 21-2). He accepts a modified version of H1, and rejects H2 and H3. To see why he thinks still more thinness would be desirable, consider his take on the concept/conception (c/c) distinction. Very roughly, a concept of X fixes the most basic possible way of understanding what an X is; a conception of X provides an articulation of the concept X - a theory of the concept's referent. Glasgow endorses the familiar view associated with the c/c distinction that two parties who disagree about X must share a concept of X. Otherwise they are talking past each other and do not contradict one another; for there is no common subject about which they could disagree. His strategic aim in applying the distinction is to maximize the possibility of real disagreement (29, 36). The thought is: even if contending thinkers represent themselves as operating with conflicting, thicker race concepts, interpretive purposes are often better served by ascribing them a common, maximally thin race concept and re-casting their dispute as disagreement in conceptions (36). In light of this aim, Glasgow's wish to provide the thinnest possible representation of the race concept makes perfect sense.

Two other features of Glasgow's approach require our attention. First, Glasgow believes the application of the c/c distinction can be facilitated by the deployment of the notion of a non-negotiable proposition (24-5). A non-negotiable proposition specifies a feature that must be applied to X if X is to be properly counted as falling under concept C. Glasgow introduces this idea by appealing to the intuition that certain elements in conceptual analysis should be non-controversial (24-5). The animality of horses is his example. If someone maintains that horses are plants, Glasgow will conclude that the person doesn't understand what a horse is or is using the word 'horse' in an idiosyncratic way (22-3). The idea seems to be roughly that if a proposition P, ascribing feature F to X is non-negotiable, then F belongs to the concept X. If P can be controverted then, and if F applies to X, F is part of the conception of X. Second, although Glasgow thinks the exercise of philosophical reflection is necessary to determine the content of the ordinary concept of race, he holds that reflection alone cannot definitively establish its content (38, 55-6, 58). Every ascription of content to a concept - including those made through non-negotiable propositions - ought ideally to be confirmed by consulting experimental data (38, 62). Without such backing, the conclusions of philosophical reflection lack a substantive foundation.

II. To lay the groundwork for my response, I'd like to argue for two critical claims. Glasgow (1) fails fully to appreciate the possibility of disagreement about concepts and (2) fails to register the likelihood that competent speakers may lack an explicative understanding of the ordinary empirical concepts they competently use.

In developing these points, I move into the controversial waters of the philosophy of language. I do so hesitantly since I don't regard myself as a philosopher of language. If, as Glasgow suggests, the plausibility of my account does not

depend on controversial claims in the philosophy of language, that's more than fine with me. But to respond fully to his discussion of my view and to bring out the differences between our positions, I need to clarify my methodology, which draws strongly on the work of Tyler Burge. I appreciate Mallon's caution about the desirability of avoiding reliance on controversial positions in the philosophy of language (17), but my own path in working on the ordinary concept of race has made it unavoidable.

1. As for full appreciation of the possibility of conflicts about concepts, consider Glasgow's preferred candidate nonnegotiable proposition that horses are animals. This proposition, he tells us, "should be non-controversial" (24-5). Now, as long as the 'should' is taken as purely subjective, I'm on board. I too think it would be nice if people accepted that horses are animals. Truth be told, I find people who don't accept it, well, irritating.

That said, it seems to me that, contrary to Glasgow, the animality of horses is something that can be intelligibly disputed (25).<sup>2</sup> Coming up with a story making the grounds of dispute plausible would require a prodigious exercise of philosophical imagination, but it is by no means impossible. Contra Glasgow again, I do not think someone who denies that horses are animals would necessarily have stopped talking about horses (cf. 25). Suppose our perverse friend claims that Trigger is a plant. The fact that 'Trigger' refers to the Lone Ranger's horse makes it clear that she is talking about horses and not shmorses (25). We can suppose she is cognizant of familiar horse truisms but regards them as mistaken. Perhaps she holds a non-standard theory about horses, one that includes a non-standard conception of the concept HORSE (Burge 1986, 710-1). Nonetheless she is wrong about horses. This does not however entitle us simply to dismiss her oddball views. If we did, we would be guilty of dogmatism; for she has succeeded in bringing the animality of horses into question. We ought, accordingly, be willing to consider her position and provide arguments in response. "Non-negotiable propositions *can* be brought into question – and indeed brought into question "for me" in the sense that I may be intellectually obligated to respond to challenges. Propositions specifying core features of concepts are not immune to controversion.

As for the concept of race, it is difficult to imagine a core claim about its content that has not been controverted. In my opinion it "should" not be controversial that the concept purports to be about things biological. But it is. There are, alas, competent users of the word 'race' who deny it.

I don't have any objection of the general strategy of recasting disputes that are couched in the language of conflicting concepts of race as disputes about conceptions of race, when possible, but my worry is that Glasgow's policy of trying to find a specification of the concept of race thin enough for everyone to agree on runs the risk of occluding the possibility (and fact) of what might be called *ground floor disagreement* – disagreements at the concept-level that cannot be commensurated by the attribution of a common concept. The race debate shows that there are such disagreements.

In my *Journal of Philosophy* article on the ordinary concept of race I argued that the claim that races have essences is *better* understood as an articulation of the ordinary *conception* of race than as a specification of the ordinary *concept* of race. I can motivate the point I am trying to make here by observing that an essentialist could intelligibly reject this interpretation, holding that the ordinary *concept* of race *is* essentially essentialist and that what I presented as the ordinary concept of race (as specified by the logical core) is really a reduced race concept that must be understood as a replacement for the ordinary concept. I believe it can be shown that essentialism can be abandoned without abandoning the ordinary concept

of race, so there's an answer to this objection. My present concern however is simply to indicate that the scope of possible disagreement extends into concepts themselves in a way I fear Glasgow may not appreciate.

When disputes run this deep it can be difficult to determine whether two parties really disagree or are actually talking past one another. An obvious question is how can commonality of subject matter be preserved when there is no agreed upon shared concept. Ways in which this can be done include: appeal to common use of an identical word form, common acknowledgement that the concept in question (whatever its precise content is) is the intended subject matter of putative truisms, bipartisan agreement about what count as relevant examples, and common acknowledgment that certain claims are held to be truisms about the examples.

2. Turning to the claim that Glasgow fails to appreciate the likelihood that people may lack an explicative understanding of the ordinary empirical concepts with which they operate, I start by noting his apparent reluctance to ascribe a lack of understanding or misunderstanding to competent users of the word 'race'. He may be motivated by an admirable concern to show due respect for ordinary speakers and for the understanding exhibited in competent use. My hunch is he is forced to deny that speakers misunderstand the ordinary concept of race because he does not distinguish between the kind of understanding exhibited by competent use of a term and the kind of understanding required to arrive at a correct characterization of a meaning of a term – a distinction emphasized by Tyler Burge (1986, 713; 1989, 660, 661).

Both kinds of understanding require familiarity with ways in which the term is used and with the examples to which it is applied, but the conditions of *explicative understanding* are far more demanding those of *understanding in use*. The former requires an ability to reflect upon and objectify one's use of

the term and the conditions governing that use. The latter does not. Once the distinction between the two sorts of understanding is drawn, it becomes clear how it is possible to attribute failure to understand of a concept without denying competence in use. One attributes a failure of *explicative* understanding. It seems to me that a rich appreciation of the possibility of such failures is a precondition of fully grasping the debate about the ordinary concept of race.

The possibility that speakers may lack explicative understanding of concepts they competently use can be motivated by the observation that the concept that concerns us when we are interested in the ordinary concept of race is a communal concept. Glasgow's emphasis on the importance of determining "what we mean by 'race' "suggests that he shares this view (42, 43, 51). Communal concepts are distinguished from idiolectic concepts (Burge 1993, 315, 319). The content of the latter is fixed by an idealization of the individuals' use. The content of the former is not. Communal concepts cannot be identified with what terms used to express them mean for the speaker (Burge 1993, 316). They must be also distinguished from the conceptions individual speaker associate with them.3 The existence of a gap between individual use (and reflection) and communal concept helps to explain how individuals can lack explicative understanding of certain concepts they use.4

Another factor that helps to explain the possibility of explicative misunderstanding is the fundamental fact that determining the content of ordinary empirical concepts is not easy. Meanings are not transparent. Understanding one's own language can be difficult. This is especially true with when it comes to the ordinary concept of race. That concept, freighted as it is with politics and emotions and connected as it is to a broad range of complex conceptual and empirical questions, and beset as it is with collateral issues is particularly easy to misunderstand. We shouldn't be

surprised to find that many or even most competent speakers exhibit a lack of explicative understanding of it.

- III. I am now in a position to respond to Glasgow's assessment of the three elements I take to be essential to the ordinary concept of race.
- 1. According to H1, the logical core of the ordinary concept of race is *inter alia* the concept of a group of human beings distinguished from other human beings by visible physical features of the relevant kind. Glasgow basically accepts H1. He correctly notes that its formulation is vague and helpfully recommends a precisification (33). My own preference would be to recast H1 as holding that the logical core is *inter alia* the concept of a group of human beings who *as a group* are distinguished from *groups* of other human beings *by patterns of* visible physical features of the relevant kind.

Now if anything about the ordinary concept of race is obvious it is that differences in patterns of visible physical characteristics such as skin color, eye shape, and hair form figure in its determination. Glasgow shares this intuition.<sup>5</sup>

Obvious though H1 is, however, there *are* writers who deny it. Jared Diamond is perhaps the best-known example (Diamond 1994). He maintains that it possible to base a genuine racial division on the basis of invisible features such as possession (or absence) of anti-malaria genes or the enzyme lactase alone. He speaks of Swedes as belonging with Fulani in the "lactase-positive race," and most African "blacks," Japanese, and American Indians as belonging together in the "lactase-negative race."

Diamond's rhetorical genius lies in the subtlety with which he teaches the reader a new, non-standard way of projecting the word 'race'. He introduces the novel language game of applying the word 'race' to divisions based on any arbitrarily

chosen characteristic, without alerting the reader to this fact. And he surreptitiously invites readers to slide from the sound idea that the (application of the) concept of race is arbitrary (in many contexts) to the deeply erroneous idea that the concept itself is completely arbitrary in the sense that the features that go into the determination of the racehood of groups is completely arbitrary.

Now in my opinion Diamond gets it wrong about race. His putative examples of "races without color" are not genuine races. Nor are they plausible candidates for racehood. It is quite evident that the so-called "lactase-positive" and "lactase-negative races" are not races in the relevant (ordinary) sense of the word. They simply are not the sort of groups we call "races" when using the word 'race' in the ordinary way, and the reason for this is that they are not distinguished from other racial groups by differences in their patterns of visible physical characteristics.

In baldly denying racehood to the "lactase-positive" and "lactase-negative races," I am inviting readers to consult their own intuitions. I am asking them to determine whether on reflection they agree. Should they agree, I have a hermeneutic hook. Should they not, I must look for another hook. It is not question begging to deny that Diamond's putative races are real races provided it is done in this spirit. It would not be question begging to say "Come on, those aren't genuine races" to Diamond himself if said with the intention of inviting reflection.

Now of course, Diamond might not play along. For one thing he might have the opposite intuition. And he might not acknowledge – or have – the intuition I would like to elicit. This could be because new intuitions associated with the novel projected use of 'race' introduced in "Race without Color" mask or replace older intuitions – intuitions shared by most competent users of the word 'race'. Access to the

relevant intuitions might also be blocked by his conviction that the determination of which groups are races is a purely arbitrary matter.<sup>6</sup> I could not of course reasonably expect Diamond to be moved by any of my diagnostic speculations. If I wanted to convince him I would have to try something else.

I might try presenting him with prominent examples of traditional racial divisions: e.g., Bernier's, von Linné's, Kant's, and Blumenbach's - on the plausible assumption that these are examples of divisions we intuitively regard as racial (Bernier 1684/2000; von Linné 1806/1997; Kant 1777/2000; Blumenbach 1865/2000). I might ask him whether these divisions support any generalizations about differences in patterns of visible physical differences between the groups that are represented as racial. I might repeat this process asking him to reflect in the same way about the Big Three and the US Management and Budget Five. I would ask if there is a single candidate racial group among any of these examples that is not distinguished from some other candidate racial group by differences in visible physical features. I would also ask if he could come up with any racial division that does not appear to be wholly made up that does not make reference to visible physical characteristics. If this did not persuade him the dialectic would just have to continue. The fact that someone does not share a particular intuition does not bring the conversation to a crashing halt.

It's not clear to me that there is any purely "objective" way of proving that a concept contains a given element that does not appeal to intuition or call for reflection. My own view is that the meaning of ordinary empirical terms and the content of ordinary empirical concepts is determined through reflection by a dialectic that attempts to arrive at a fit between characterizations of examples of entities to which the term or concept purports to apply and specifications of the

characterizations that select the examples and an agreement about this fit among competent speakers.<sup>7</sup>

My understanding of reflection equilibrium differs significantly from Glasgow's. Personal intuitions are in no way privileged in the search (cf. Glasgow 2009, 55). The relevant intuitions are not personal in the sense of being intuitions concerning what the term means for me. They concern communal use and meaning, and acquired through participation in the community. Anyone's intuitions can be challenged and corrected. Mischaracterization of the examples or misunderstanding of communal practice are perennial possibilities. Speakers are responsible for correctly characterizing communal practice. They are also responsible for correctly characterizing the entities to which their terms purport to apply. The fact that characterizations of meaning are sensitive to empirical fact means that it is not the case that intuitions constitute the *final court of appeal* in this process (58). Inasmuch as the process of reflective equilibrium looks out to the physical and social world it cannot properly be called solipsistic (56).

Individual speakers participate in the process as insiders (Burge 1986, 703). The language they seek to understand is not foreign and unknown. The meanings they seek to identify are meanings of terms they competently use and understand. Their intuitions have the presumptive (and defeasible) authority of intuitions of competent generic speakers.

The process is at root social, even when carried out in isolation. Individual reflection must take the intuitions, challenges, and corrections of other speakers into account and must be understood as a part of a larger communal, transgenerational process of reflection aiming at correct characterization of the examples and agreement in reflective judgments by the most competent speakers. Correctness is

established by reflective acceptance. Claims to correctness are open to criticism and revision. Challenges to correctness are met by invitations to further reflection and a willingness to reflect further oneself.

- 2. One general question I have about Glasgow's wish to jettison H2 and H3 is whether he thinks there is anything objectionable about them other than the fact that some people are disinclined to accept them. Ordinarily when we object to an account as being too thick, it is because there is something objectionable or problematic about the thick-making components.<sup>8</sup>
- 3. That H1 secures assent more readily than H2 and H3 should come as no surprise. It is a mistake to think that every element of a given concept will be as easily identified as any other. The identification of some elements may call for substantially more reflection than others.

As to why H1 secures assent more readily than H2 and H3, my guess is that it is because it functions as the epistemically primary definition for most speakers (Burge 1993, 314). H2 and H3 are best understood as components of a metaphysical definition of the ordinary concept of race (Burge 1993, 314). Interestingly H1 does double duty as a component of both epistemic and metaphysical definitions. H2 and H3 do not attempt to specify conditions speakers treat as most basic for applying the concept of race. They instead purport to represent basic features of the concept – features that underlie those listed in H1.

One reason for counting H2 and H3 components of the ordinary concept of race is that they provide a principled metaphysical characterization of the sort of visible physical traits that belong to the patterns of visible *traits of the relevant kind*. The traits that count as relevant are first of all biological traits passed down from parents to children. Even before the

discovery of genetics, it was widely recognized that offspring tend to inherit the visible physical features of their parents including racial ones. H2 points to a partial explanatory ground of H1. When individuals exhibit the visible physical traits associated with the race to which they belong, it is because they have inherited them from their parents. The traits that count as relevant are secondly, traits that are associated with distinct geographical regions. The groups exhibiting visible physical traits of the relevant kind originated in different continental and quasi-continental regions. The different geographical regions have distinct climates and environmental conditions which are likely to have figured in the development of those patterns. The differences in geographical locations can be thought of as markers of factors figuring in the explanation of the differences in the patterns referred to in H1.

Inclusion of H3 in the specification of the content of the ordinary concept of race might be regarded as optional given H1 and H2. Since the relevant ancestral groups (those exhibiting patterns of visible physical differences of the relevant kind) do in fact originate in different geographic regions, if groups satisfying the two first conditions are picked out, the relevant differences in geographic origin will in effect have been included. But insofar as H3 represents markers of salient components of the explanation of the morphological differences referred in H1, it is illuminating to include it in the specification of the concept. Recognition of the geographical differences referred to H3 (and the associated climatic conditions) may also contribute to the identification of the relevant physical characteristics.

A further reason for counting H2 and H3 along with H1 as components of the ordinary concept of race is that taken together they pick out what appears to be an identifiable biological phenomenon: *morphological differences corresponding to differences in continental ancestry*. For present purposes I

bracket the issue of whether this phenomenon establishes the existence of races or reality of race. I do, however, note that the phenomenon appears intuitively to be *unified*; there is a clear intuitive sense in which it is one.

This existence of this phenomenon (supposing it does exist) is presumably contingent in the sense that had the world been different it would not have come into existence, but there is nothing arbitrary about the selection of H1-H3 in characterizing the phenomenon. The circumstance of H1 is required for morphological difference. The circumstance of H2 is required for ancestral difference. The circumstance H3 is required for geographical difference.

Neither H2 nor H3 are immediately given features of the phenomenon. The *formation* of the concept of race required empirical investigation that went beyond recognition of differences in patterns of visible physical differences. It required understanding that these differences were associated with differences in ancestry and differences in location of geographical origin.<sup>9</sup> It also required grasping the differences in patterns of visible differences, differences in ancestry, and differences in continental ancestry *as a unity*.

The reflection required for the full *explication* of the ordinary concept must fully characterize the phenomenon to which the concept purports to apply. This is a consequence of the idea that the explication of meaning proceeds through an attempt to arrive at a factually accurate characterization of the examples to which the concept in question purports to apply. To be adequate the characterization must be complete. This entails that explicative reflection cannot stop with recognition of differences in patterns of visible physical characteristics but must also take up differences in ancestry and continental origin.

4. I'd like to close my discussion by presenting a slight variant of Glasgow's Twin Earth example. Let's imagine that individuals on Racial Twin Earth exhibit exactly the same range of phenotypes of the relevant kind (those associated with African, Asian, and European, etc., ancestry) that we do. That is, for each continental ancestry-related phenotype on Earth, there is a corresponding type-identical phenotype on twin Earth (cf. 32).

What distinguishes the twin Earth phenotypes that correspond to continental ancestry related phenotypes found on Earth from the phenotypes to which they correspond is that the twin Earth phenotypes do not reflect ancestry. Individuals on twin Earth are linked *only* by similarity of visible appearance (32).

Since the twin Earth phenotypes are *ex hypothesi* typeidentical to phenotypes we call "racial" on Earth, I can understand the inclination to call the Twin Earth phenotypes 'racial'. But let's examine the state of affairs on twin Earth more closely.

We can start by supposing that white-skinned parents on twin Earth have brown-skinned kids, yellow-skinned parents have white-skinned kids, and brown-skinned parents have yellow-skinned kids. Now let's suppose that the color relation between family members is even less systematic than that. Suppose the human species on twin Earth is color-panmictic. The skin color of kids would (at least loosely speaking) be completely unpredictable. It would be statistically normal that twin Earth siblings did not share the same race-like phenotype. Notice that the people in twin Africa, Asia, and Europe would not collectively look *exactly* like the people in Africa, Asia, and Europe at all (32). There wouldn't be a dominant phenotype on these or any other continent.

Now the question: Would it be intuitive to call the twin Earth groups formed by phenotype similarity individuals races? My own intuition is that it would not. The twin Earth groups aren't the kind of groups we call "racial" We ordinarily think of "race" as something that is transmitted from parents to children. Racial groups are ancestral groups. Consider the examples we looked at in discussing H1. The ordinary concept of race is a historical concept. The phenotype-linked groups on twin Earth lack the trans-generational "glue" we expect races to have. Individual races are not only thought of being linked synchronically by resemblance in patterns of visible physical characteristic but also as being linked diachronically by relations of descent. Although we can call the relevant phenotypic differences on twin Earth "racial" it is by no means clear that they are racial in the ordinary sense of the term.

III. It seems to me that the ordinary concept of race as specified by the logical core (minimalist race) is probably as thin as you can get without becoming anorexic. I do think that taking H1(or H1\*) alone as Glasgow recommends has its uses. It can be deployed as a reduced specification of the ordinary concept of race - one that will more readily secure acceptance than a representation of the concept that includes H1-H3. But what H1 (or Glasgow's H1\*) taken by itself amounts to is a kind of abbreviated representation of the ordinary concept of race specified by H1-H3. H1 is a discursive Trojan horse. If you pick out groups characterized by H1 (which exhibit patterns of visible physical characteristics of the relevant sort), the groups you pick out will automatically satisfy H2 and H3. The patterns won't be of the relevant sort unless the groups have different geographical ancestries. H1-H3 provide a fuller specification of the ordinary concept of race than H1 taken alone. I have tried to indicate why we need not find the resistance H1-H3 may meet troubling. Competent speakers' explicative understanding of the ordinary concept of race is likely to be incomplete or contain various errors. Recognition that H2 and H3 belong to the concept calls for more reflection than is required to see that the concept includes H1. More persuasion is needed.

If we ourselves find H1-H3 convincing as a characterization of the ordinary concept of race (and here the relevant question is a first-personal one) for this would involve ascribing to them a concept that is intuitively racial, is non-essentialist, makes sense, and secures a common subject matter.

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<sup>1</sup> I much prefer the locution 'ordinary concept of race' to 'folk concept of race' in part because I believe that the use of the term 'folk' the latter expression draws on was introduced to connote populist incompetence and standardly carries such connotations. I do not, however, think Glasgow means for his use of the term to carry this overtone. 'Ordinary' as I use it does not so much contrast with 'expert' as it does with 'technical'. It does not carry specifically populist overtones. I do not identify its content with whatever commonsense says race is.

- <sup>2</sup> One possible reason for hesitating to take it to be Glasgow's considered view that horses are not plants cannot be disputed is that he is committed to the view that he thinks the claim that the concept animal is conceptually embedded in the ordinary concept horse requires experimental confirmation (which suggests the possibility of experimental disconfirmation).
- <sup>3</sup> One worry I have about experiments designed to assess subjects judgments about the concept of race is that they may lack this conceptual granularity required to make these

distinctions. I also worry about their sensitivity to the concept/conception distinction.

- <sup>4</sup> Idiolectic concepts can also be misunderstood. See Burge (1986, 705-6 note 10).
- <sup>5</sup> Glasgow professes an in principle willingness to give up the intuition supporting H1\*, should it not be experimentally confirmed (35). My own view is that this is a mistake. I don't mean to suggest that no empirical discoveries could possibly lead to the revision or rejection H1. Were it to turn out, as a matter of empirical fact, that differences in human skin color are actually due to late night spray painting by the race fairies, *that* would surely require modification of H1. Barring a radical discovery of this order, however, the only thing the fact that a majority of experimental subjects implicitly or explicitly denied that the idea of differences in visible physical differences is conceptually embedded in the concept RACE would show is that *the majority can get it wrong*.
- <sup>6</sup> This is an example of the sort of collateral belief that complicates the dialectic of concept content determination.
- <sup>7</sup> The procedure can be modified if there are doubts about whether the term or concept in question actually refers. In place of selecting entities that are represented as "archetypical examples" (since the claim there are *any* examples is under dispute and there are no agreed upon "good" examples of races), one starts with *actual* entities (here groups) that are represented as constituting the (contextually-determined) most plausible candidate examples of the relevant term or concept.

<sup>9</sup> Interestingly all three elements can be found in Bernier (1684/2000).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> I owe this observation to Sarah D. Hardimon.