



**Cogito**

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*Studies in Philosophy and its History*

# Cogito

## *Studies in Philosophy and its History*

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**Practical Rationality  
in Political Contexts  
Facing Diversity  
in Contemporary  
Multicultural Europe**

**edited by**

**Gabriele De Anna and Riccardo Martinelli**



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# On the Philosophical Significance of National Characters. Reflections from Hume and Kant

RICCARDO MARTINELLI

## 1. Are there National Characters?

It is widely agreed that human action and the associated responsibilities are determined by the individual in question. At the same time, most people believe that human behaviour may also be affected by phenomena that are collective, such as family idiosyncrasies or national characters. The idea that the Germans, the French, the Italians, etc. tend to act in a certain way – in short, that there is something like a national character, is commonplace. Certain non-essential aspects of human agency can be thought of in this respect. Principally eschewing the sphere of juridical or moral responsibility, national characters are invoked to explain everyday habits, minor peculiarities, general trends and attitudes. Arguments concerning national characters, accordingly, are usually confined to witty conversation. Unfortunately, history also provides a number of examples of politically biased use of such arguments, aimed at raising hostile sentiments toward a certain nation, people, or group. Despite its apparent innocence, folk belief concerning the characteristics of different peoples may occasionally be steered to foster prejudice and even justify persecution or warfare.

The aim of this paper, however, is not to address the historical misuse of the idea of national character. Taking a politically neutral and peaceful use for grant-

ed, I rather discuss the question of whether, and in what sense, national characters may have philosophical relevance. At first sight, any consideration concerning national characters seem to roam far below the threshold of philosophically respectable arguments. On the other hand, one strikingly finds the theme dealt with by authors no less than Hume, Kant, and many others. Curiosity may well arise as to the readiness of these outstanding figures to embark on alleged unphilosophical gossip concerning national idiosyncrasies. What did Hume and Kant argue in relation to national characters? Is their treatment of the topic confined to the philosophical debate of the Eighteenth century, or do their arguments still retain relevance? Can we learn something from these arguments about how to consider national diversities?

In this paper, I mainly consider two texts: David Hume's essay "On National Characters" and Immanuel Kant's *Pragmatic Anthropology*. Refraining from anecdotal detail, I concentrate upon the core arguments put forward by these philosophers when it comes to characterising peoples. Hume and Kant, as it emerges, clearly defend two different, somehow opposite views of national characters and their causes. A cursory investigation into the general concept of "character" will be the first step of this analysis. I shall then proceed to examine the accounts of Hume and Kant and finally offer a comparative analysis of these accounts.

## 2. What is Character?

Like its almost identical cognates in other modern languages, the English term *character* covers a wide semantic range. Most generally, one can consider character as a disposition, or the tendency to act in a certain way. In its typically dense language, Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* defines the character of a certain thing as the "law of its causality, without which it would not be a cause at all" (Kant 1998, 536. KrV A539/B567). All of the effects of a given entity unfold according to a certain law, and this law is its character. In the previous quote, taken from the *Transcendental Dialectics*, Kant gives an abstractly metaphysical definition of character. Accordingly, even inanimate things possess a character, at least insofar as they cause whatever they effect. Yet Kant mainly dwells on the character of human beings, which is actually the most interesting topic.

A further glance at the history of the term is highly instructive. The Greek *charaktér* stems from a verb that refers to the activity of stamping, e.g. the stamping of a metal to make coins, etc. (Incidentally, this also accounts for the modern typographic use of the term). Similarly, character is metaphorically understood as a pattern which is stamped, as it were, upon the human soul. With his *Ethical Characters*, Teophrastus of Eresus may have been the first to use the term system-

atically in reference to human beings (see below). Thus, *charaktér* does not totally coincide with *ēthos*, a term that – as already Aristotle notes – refers to a habit, or ‘costume’ (the Latin *mos*, whence *morals*), which indicates a likewise permanent, yet altogether less invariable quality of the soul. Remarkably, we are already presented here with a recurrent opposition between passively received and actively developed attitudes of one’s personality. Although no drastic divide line exists here, *charaktér* evokes a quality superimposed upon the soul, like the impression of a seal; whereas *ēthos* conveys a set of customary practices (either individual or collective) that eventually fuse together in a new forged attitude.

What makes the concept of character interesting is just its ambiguity, resulting from the combination of passive and active factors. In any event, the modern term ‘character’ may render both *charaktér* and *ēthos*, frequently in association with a partially overlapping term such as temperament. Originally developed within the Hippocratic school of medicine, the doctrine of the four temperaments – sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric and melancholic – was later to be developed by Galen into a full-fledged and exceptionally long-lasting medical theory.<sup>1</sup> Unsurprisingly, as we shall see, modern philosophers often deal with character and temperament in the same context, together with other associate terms like talent or genius. Character is thereby frequently taken to be a most general and semantically flexible concept.

The renaissance of the concept of character begins with the early Modern Age. Rather than focussing on the general doctrine of virtue, individual psychology now highlights the importance of one’s singularity and character. Within the flourishing literary genres of biography and autobiography, for instance, character becomes the unique and distinctive mark of the human subject (cf. Dilthey 1913). The Medieval (Augustinian) definition of character as the uniformed “seal” of the soul, marking its belonging to the Lord’s army, began to shift into the background, while Ancient studies on character attract renewed interest. One of the most remarkable cases is that of Teophrastus’ *Characters*, translated into French by La Bruyère in 1688. Teophrastus, who succeeded Aristotle as the head of the Lyceum, wrote a scathing overview of human types, caught in their typical attitudes: the sycophant, the insolent or ironic person, etc. With this sketchy and occasionally grotesque parade, Teophrastus portraits real persons rather than idealised types<sup>2</sup>. Following the same general thread, La Bruyère’s own book *Les Characters* enjoyed an enduring legacy and exerted a wide influence over the literary and philosophical culture in Europe (La Bruyère 1975).

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<sup>1</sup> On the history of this concept cf. Pongratz 1971.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the modern edition: Teophrastus 2004.

Before we consider the next significant steps in the history of the concept of character, represented by Hume and Kant's elaborations, some further remarks are perhaps appropriate. In fact, people frequently speak of the character of a certain people (the case under discussion), of young or old people, of genders, and even – as Kant did – of the human species as a whole. Applying character to groups, however, brings in some further ambiguity, and may lead to confusion. On the one hand, an allegedly identical (or at least similar) character should inhere in many individuals at once: for instance, in every French *as* French, in every old person *as* old person, in every woman *as* woman. On the other hand, many characters simultaneously dwell within a single person – think, for instance, of an aged French gentlewoman. As to this interwoven multiplicity, no preliminary theorising seems possible: observation presents itself as the only reasonable way to cope with it. For this reason, anthropology rather than ethics tends to become the most appropriate systematic place for a treatment of character, as clearly emerges from Kant's (and later Hegel's) work.

Far from aiming at a thoroughgoing historical reconstruction, these remarks merely serve to shed some light on the peculiarities of this notion. It is not just the concept of national character that is problematic, but the concept of character is in itself intrinsically problematic. It points at the manifold differences among human beings and among human groups. These differences stem from the complex interlacement of biological and cultural differences, which are conjoined in a unique manner in each case. In the face of experience, denying any regularity of national character could be a viable strategy, yet not the one adopted by Hume and Kant.

### 3. Hume on National Characters

Hume gives no exact definition of character in his work. This failure has occasioned a number of controversies among scholars as to the meaning of this notion.<sup>3</sup> While most commentators agree about the centrality of character for Hume's moral doctrine, profound differences subsist as to the correct interpretation of what character is – or should be – from a Humean perspective. Provided that moral actions follow from one's character (as Hume says, they are its "signs"),<sup>4</sup> how is character to be understood? A realist metaphysical theory pictures character as a sort of morally relevant 'substance', inhabiting the subject

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<sup>3</sup> For an introduction to this debate, see McIntyre 1990. Against McIntyre, Costelloe (2004) advocates a "practical" (vs. "metaphysical") view of character. See also Beier (2008).

<sup>4</sup> Hume 2007, 367 (SB 575): "If any *action* be either virtuous or vicious, 'tis only as a sign of some quality or character".

and directing action (and inaction) from inside. However, this is manifestly at odds with Hume's view of the self as a 'bundle' of perceptions. On other hand, a soft explanation of character as a sort of loosely applicable general tendency falls short of the pivotal role of character within Hume's moral philosophy. Let us for the moment leave this question unanswered. To my knowledge, at least, no attempt has been made to consider this critical issue together with that of *national* character, which is possibly even thornier: for what kind of "substance" could inhere in all (or most) individuals belonging to a certain people, which might be labelled as character, and how did these individuals come to share this "substance"? Assessing what national character is could shed some light on the problems of individual character.

First and foremost, in his "On National Characters" Hume aims at undermining the so-called climate theory. Famously held by Montesquieu, the climate theory attributes the origin of national characters to differences of climate and, more generally, to geographical rather than cultural factors.<sup>5</sup> Basically, the climate theory was a renewed version of the ancient Hippocratic tenet that some distinguishing marks (e.g. courage and martial virtue) of a population depend on the qualities of the inhabited soil: climate, air, and water. The modern version insists that one should consider national differences seriously and embrace a latitudinary view of politics. Good civil Constitutions fit national characters and support or balance their specificity.

Hume tackles the climate theory quite explicitly. He highlights its inconsistency by showing that the character of a nation stems from the political regime ruling it over time. Capsizing the main argument of the climate theorists, Hume argues that national characters are forged by the different forms of political power: accordingly, the purpose of adapting the Constitution to the alleged national character simply does not make any sense. At any rate, this move forces Hume to admit – not without cautious qualifications – that something like national characters do exist.

"On National Characters" opens with the following remarks:

The vulgar are apt to carry all *national characters* to extremes; and, having once established it as a principle, that any people are knavish, or cowardly, or ignorant, they will admit of no exception, but comprehend every individual under the same censure. 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. (NC, 202)

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<sup>5</sup> On Montesquieu and national character, see Romani (2002, 19-63), who notes that the contrast between France and England is already sketched by Montesquieu in the context of a criticism of the costumes of the French (Romani 2002, 24).

Hume prudently refers to the probability that some quality occur among individuals of a certain nation. Allowance for specific “set of manners”, peculiar to different nations, should not efface that remarkable exceptions may always exist. Wit and gaiety – Hume uses as examples – belong to the French much more than to the Spaniards, but a giant of humour like Miguel de Cervantes was born in Spain.

As to the reason of such general regularities, Hume definitely hints at *moral* causes rather than at *physical* ones. Moral causes are, for instance, “the nature of the government, the revolutions of public affairs, the plenty or penury in which the people live, the situation of the nation with regard to its neighbours, and such like circumstances”. Hume explains:

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. (NC, 203)

But how do moral causes come to forge national characters? The human mind – Hume claims – is intrinsically imitative, so that it is impossible for anybody to live in a certain country without absorbing the dominating attitude of compatriots, expressed by the manner of managing some important business such as defence, commerce, and government. As a consequence, though nature originally provides a full variety of characters, their proportion changes with time.

Now though nature produces all kinds of temper and understanding in great abundance, it does not follow, that she always produces them in like proportions, and that in every society the ingredients of industry and indolence, valour and cowardice, humanity and brutality, wisdom and folly, will be mixed after the same manner. (NC, 208)

Hume provides several examples: “If we run over the globe, or revolve the annals of history, we shall discover everywhere signs of a sympathy or contagion of manners, none of the influence of air or climate” (NC, 209). The Chinese have the most uniform character, following on the permanent effect of an exceptionally long-lasting Empire.

Another remarkable case is that of England. Since the government is a mixture of “monarchy, aristocracy and democracy”; and all “religious sects are to be found”; since the ruling class is made up of both “gentry and merchants” and finally, since men enjoy a “great liberty and independency”, it follows that “the English, of any people in the universe, have the least of a national character; unless this very singularity may pass for such” (NC, 212).

The apparently paradoxical non-character of Englishmen should not mislead us. It is not necessarily a specific fault of theirs, because Hume considers character

an altogether paradoxical notion. In the first *Enquiry* he states “that the characters of men are, to a certain degree, inconstant and irregular. This is, in a manner, the constant character of human nature [...]”. Besides individual character and national character, Hume considers an altogether human character as well. Hume does consider human nature as governed by general rules and widely predictable, like the “winds, clouds, and other variations of the weather are supposed to be governed by steady principles; though not easily discoverable by human sagacity and enquiry” (Hume 2000, 67). Necessity, rather than freedom rules human actions: he who “at noon leaves his purse full of gold on the pavement at Charing Cross, may as well expect that it fly away like a feather, as that he will find it untouched an hour after”. Despite the witty nature of this example, Hume concludes, “[a]bove one half of the human reasoning contains inferences of a similar nature” (Hume 2000, 69-70).

In my view, Hume’s remarks about national character and human character should be taken into account when it comes to defining the debated notion of individual character. Though an exhaustive discussion must be deferred to another occasion, it is clear that they make a “metaphysical” interpretation of Hume’s notion of character untenable.

#### 4. Character in Kant’s Anthropology

As noted previously, Kant defines character as the “law” ruling the effects of a certain thing. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* he also draws a famous distinction between *empirical* and *intelligible* character. With this distinction, Kant aims at harmonising the universality of natural laws with the existence of human freedom. The empirical character refers to the human being taken as an appearance, who obeys natural laws. At the same time, Kant argues, human beings possess an intelligible character that refers to the realm of things in themselves. Freedom and nature, thus, can be “both found in the same actions, simultaneously and without any contradiction, according to whether one compares them with their intelligible or sensible cause” (Kant 1998, 536). Like any other thing-in-itself, intelligible character is totally unknown. Clues as to its presence and quality can be only deduced from the empirical character, which acts as a sign of the intelligible one. Accordingly, Kant deals with (empirical) character in his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. The second part of the work, the Anthropological characteristic, is an empirical semiotics of character, consisting of an analysis of the character of the person, the sexes, the peoples, the races and finally the human species. In his definition, Kant now defines character into three elements, rather than into two. He distinguishes the “natural aptitude” (*Naturell*), the “tempera-

ment or sensibility”, and “character purely and simply”(AP, 185). Natural dispositions and temper play a role within the development one’s character, yet the purely “moral” character depends solely on the determination of the will. The person of character who assumes morality as a permanent rule brings about a sort of sudden “explosion”, which resembles of a second birth.

Notwithstanding Kant’s efforts, one may suspect that empirical and moral elements hardly blend into a consistent notion of character. How long will the complex of natural dispositions and sensible temperament stand in effortless agreement with the rock-like determinateness of behaving in accordance with the commandments of the moral law? A harmonisation may be taken into account as an exception, but is nevertheless unlikely to set a rule within an empirical or pragmatic anthropology. In other words: why did Kant put empirical and moral elements together within a spurious anthropological notion of character, given that their coexistence is scarcely to be expected – especially within Kant’s fundamentally pessimistic picture of human nature, which he famously compared with a “crooked timber”?

Kant tries to avoid this potential inconsistency in his anthropological notion of character with a bipartite notion of “nature”. Whenever we think of nature as the totality of mechanical causes and effects, a complete discontinuity between empirical and moral character is the unavoidable conclusion. By contrast, positing the account of nature given by Kant in the *Critique of the Faculty of Judgement* (and elsewhere in his writings on the philosophy of history), allows a different picture to emerge. Accordingly, nature can be legitimately thought of as teleologically oriented to achieve a certain set of goals. Strictly speaking we don’t have any knowledge of nature in this latter sense. Yet we are allowed to take as a regulative principle that nature operates in this way, and say that “nature” aims at the full development of human reason, that is, at the achievement of a future state characterised by a full deployment of knowledge and virtue.

This move allows Kant to think of the *natural dispositions* of the human being in teleological terms as well. Accordingly, the contrast between instincts and morality begins to fade. In its higher wisdom, nature endowed the human species with a set of attitudes that, on the whole, points in the right direction.

In Kant’s view, for instance, *human* sexuality is not merely a biologic fact. Mere preservation of the species could be easily guaranteed otherwise: without sexuality, or by a merely animal approach to it. Yet by establishing a different *character* for men and women nature gains a twofold goal: the preservation of the species and the progressive cultivation and refinement of society. Kant suggests we consider “not what we make our end, but what *nature’s end* was” and insists that the principle presiding over the character of the sexes “does not depend on our choice but on a higher purpose for the human race”, that is, “the preservation

of the species” and “the cultivation of society and its refinement by womankind” (AP, 207). Under the supervision of nature’s wisdom, the physically weaker gender dominates over the stronger one: woman is made “man’s ruler through her modesty and eloquence in speech and expression”. Scorning brutality as a mean of obtaining sexual satisfaction, men are led “if not to morality itself, to that which is its cloak, moral decency, which is the preparation for morality and its recommendation” (AP, 207). After this digression, we can go back to the concept of national character. Kant clearly attempts a somewhat systematic treatment of national characters. To begin with, he singles out the culturally most developed nations. Echoing a long tradition, Kant considers England and France the “two most civilised peoples on earth” and deals with them separately (AP, 214). In a footnote, it is added that Germany is excluded because of the self-modesty of the author, who takes care of avoiding any possibility of indirectly praising himself by praising the Germans. Be that as it may, “England and France are perhaps the only peoples to which one can assign a definite and – as long as they do not become mixed by the violence of war – unchangeable character”. As to the remaining nations, Kant believes that:

[N]ational peculiarity is derivable not so much from their different types of culture – as is for the most part so in the preceding two cases [England and France, R.M.] – as from the predispositions of their nature, which results from the mixture of their originally different tribes. (AP, 218)

Needless to say, Hume’s tenet that national character stems from the prolonged effect of the forms of government is rejected. Though Kant agrees with the rebuttal of the climate theory, he outrightly charges Hume – not directly mentioned, yet clearly referred to – of circularity:

To claim that the kind of character a people will have depends entirely on its form of government is an ungrounded assertion that explains nothing; for from where does the government itself get its particular character? (AP, 215)

Kant does not provide a precise explanation of the origin of national characters. He speaks of the “innate character, of which the acquired and artificial character is only the result” (AP, 214). Once more, as for the character of the individual, he presents a twofold structure, made up of an original, natural element, and of an acquired or artificial one. However, one may ask, where does the former, “innate” element come from, if neither from climate, nor from government? Kant suggests that the existing evidence does not allow us to pronounce the last word. As to England and France, for instance, he confesses that “what they actually have at present, and its formation by means of language, this must be derived

from the innate character of the original people of their ancestry; but the documents for this are lacking”. Kant dares some further hypothesis concerning the development of the English nation: the invasion of England by German and French peoples obliterated the original stem of the Britons, “as their mixed language proves”. Together with the circumstance of the geographic insulation, this fact had remarkable consequences. Modern Englishmen “have a character that they have acquired for themselves when they actually have none by nature. Accordingly, the character of the Englishman cannot signify anything other than the principle learned from early teaching and example, that he must make a character for himself, that is, affect to have one” (AP, 216). The resulting character strikingly contrasts with that of the French:

That this character is more directly opposed to that of the French people than to any other is evident from the fact that it renounces all amiability toward others, and indeed even among the English people, whereas amiability is the most prominent social quality of the French. The Englishman claims only respect, and by the way, each wants only to live as he pleases. (AP, 216)

Kant indulges in contrasting these two “most civilised” peoples against each other. Seemingly, he tends to treat them as a dichotomy, thereby gaining a general rule for the treatment of national character. It would be perhaps exaggerated to say that England and France roughly correspond to male and female. Yet Kant’s insistence that the differences between the two above named peoples are polar oppositions than nevertheless complement each other, formally resembles of his analysis of the character of the sexes, given in the previous chapter of *Anthropology*.

A further group of nations is made up by Spain, Italy and Germany. Kant sketches the characters of these peoples starting from disparate considerations. He speaks of a mixture of “European with Arabian blood” in the case of Spain, (AP, 218) considers the Italian character as a mixture of French vivacity and Spanish seriousness, and finally invokes the doctrine of temperaments to deal with the Germans, who have “phlegm combined with understanding” (AP, 219). The nations of this group are culturally developed, yet they still bear heavy influences of natural aspects in their character – much more than England and France.

A third group of nations falls short of a true character, because of a failure in the development of “what is necessary for a definite concept of natural predispositions which lie ready in it”. In other terms, these nations don’t have yet – or anymore – a definite character. For different reasons in each case, Kant includes Russia, Poland, Turkey and modern Greece within this group. However, caution is highly recommended in this description, since “the question here is about innate, natural character which, so to speak, lies in the blood mixture of

the human being, not characteristics of nations that are acquired and artificial (or spoiled by too much artifice)”.

## **5. Concluding remarks**

In sum, Kant refuses Hume’s claim that political regime determines character and rather insists on the process by means of which an unknown natural disposition (typical of each different ancient “tribe”) develops into a well-defined national character proper – a process influenced by a multiplicity of factors. However, Kant assigns little importance to the investigation of this ancestral natural attitude: in “an anthropology from a pragmatic point of view”, he contends, “the only thing that matters to us is to present the character” of peoples “as they are now, in some examples, and, as far as possible, systematically; which makes it possible to judge what each can expect from the other and how each could use the other to his own advantage” (AP, 214).

In the writings of Hume and Kant, national character is not a mere misunderstanding devoid of philosophical legitimacy. They do not simply collect humorous platitudes or worn-out stereotypes on European nations. They start from the plain fact that national differences of character subsist, although with obvious limitations, and discuss them philosophically. Both reject the climate theory: Hume counts national characters among the effects of politics; Kant allows for a natural disposition, but contends that its identification is neither possible nor necessary, given that one should start from observation and “pragmatically” try to turn differences – including faults and deviations – into advantages.

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