

Hegel's *Anthropology*

Life, Psyche, and Second Nature



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a contemporary historian, was that the abolition of slavery would represent “the destruction of a paternalist society, where the whites were no longer able to protect their ‘black families.’”²⁷

3. From Enlightenment to Reaction: Johann Blumenbach to James Hunt

One major author for whom scientific monogenism and radical ethical universalism went hand in hand was Hegel’s contemporary, the scientist and social egalitarian Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752–1840). In his vastly influential works,²⁸ Blumenbach offers the first modern racial classification in a monogenist framework based on two sets of arguments: scientific and ethical. Blumenbach’s anthropology is Rousseauian and occasionally naive, as when without comment he invokes the “natural domesticity” of man. But his scientific grounding, vast scholarship, and ethical commitment to Enlightenment universalism make him stand out among his contemporaries. Races, Blumenbach teaches in his *Beyträge zur Naturgeschichte* (1790; *Contributions on Natural History*), are varieties (*Menschenvarietäten*) of one and the same human stem (*das Menschengeschlecht*)—no matter what feelings this scientific perspective may arouse in certain European circles:

There have been persons who have most earnestly protested against their noble selves being placed in the natural system in one common species . . . with Negroes and Hottentots.²⁹ And again, there have been others who have had no compunction in declaring themselves and the orangutan to be creatures of one and the same species.³⁰ . . . Perhaps . . . it will contribute . . . to the tranquillization of many upon this familiar affair, if I name three philosophers of otherwise quite different opinions . . . [namely] Haller, Linnaeus, and Buffon. All three considered man different by a whole world from the orangutan, and . . . all true men, Europeans, Negroes, etc., as mere varieties [*Spielarten*] of one and the same original species [*Stammgattung*]. (Blumenbach 1790, 56–58)

Blumenbach’s general proof of monogenism (though not, unfortunately, his pugnacious antiracism) is the kind of “external touchstone” that Hegel considers necessary for the corroboration of theoretical truths—here, the truth of Hegel’s own universalistic concept of being-human. Blumenbach’s proof consists of two generalizations from empirical studies and one methodological principle.

The first generalization from empirical findings is that the physical peculiarities of the human species that are absent from all other species are found to be common to all human races. The second generalization is that different

traits among races and ethnic subgroups are without exception gradations of common features; none indicates an evolutionary leap. As for the methodological criterion, the “science of man” requires that secondary evidence from travelers’ reports and artists’ sketches be eclipsed by direct acquaintance with “the open book of nature” (Blumenbach 1790, 70). Only in this way can scholarship avoid falling prey to shameful distortions of phenotypes, customs, and behaviors perpetrated by traveling portraitists and self-styled experts: “There are not many authors of travels whose pictures, so far as regards the likenesses of nations, can be trusted,” Blumenbach warns in *De Generis* (1775, xxxvii–xxxviii). The following excerpt from chapter 13 of the *Beyträge* perfectly encapsulates his relentless denunciation of contemporaneous fabrications, caricatures, and perversions:

As to the physiognomy of the Negroes, the distance no doubt is striking if one contrasts an ugly Negro (of whom there are of course as many as ugly Europeans) with a Greek ideal. But . . . if . . . one follows the transitional forms . . . , the conspicuous contrast . . . disappears altogether—and obviously there must exist extremes in this case as in all other creatures that branch out [*ausarten*] into several varieties. (Blumenbach 1790, 88)

The English renditions of the verb *ausarten* will be discussed shortly. It is sufficient to note here the misleading translation of the last phrase by Bendyshe: “there must be extremes here as well as in the case of other creatures which *degenerate* into all sorts of races and varieties” (Blumenbach [1865] 1969, trans. Bendyshe, 306; emphasis added).

Beyond the criterion of direct acquaintance with what he calls the open book of nature, Blumenbach could have added another standard for his own research: familiarity with the open book of society. Chapter 13 of the *Beyträge* is dedicated entirely to the accomplishments of famous African individuals in European and American society, as well as to the character and demeanor of personal acquaintances from Africa. The latter include a lady met at Yverdun, “whose parents were both from the Congo” and whose “most pleasing” appearance and physiognomy made her in no way different, “if abstraction be made of the color,” from “our European ladies” (Blumenbach 1790, 89–90). In the Bendyshe translation, Blumenbach’s “if abstraction be made of the color” becomes “if one could . . . set aside the disagreeable skin” (Blumenbach [1865] 1969, trans. Bendyshe, 307).³¹

Blumenbach waxes lyrical about the few reliable accounts by unprejudiced travelers to Africa and the Middle East, all of whom testify to the moral capacity of “our black brethren, as well as their *natural* kindheartedness, qualities in which they are hardly inferior to any other variety of the human species.” He is particularly keen to extol the abilities, the “free and agreeable decorum,” and finally—quoting the naturalist Adanson—*la beauté parfaite*

of African women. In a nearly declamatory tone, Blumenbach reminds his audience of the demonstrated moral fiber of the African race, “which has never been numbed or smothered on the transport ships and the West Indian sugar plantations by the bestial brutality [*viehische Brutalität*] of their white executioners” (Blumenbach 1790, 90–91).

Blumenbach’s fervor is, however, not limited to invoking Romantic or paternalistic views of the natural innocence of the life of savages in striking contrast to the corruption and depravity of European civil society. He is particularly affronted by the attribution of “obtuse mental capacities” (Blumenbach 1790, 84) to Africans—just the kind of attribution we find reflected in Hegel’s oral commentaries on the African soul. Besides collecting craniums, Blumenbach was a zealous collector of the artistic, scientific, and literary works of Africans. In chapter 13 of the *Beyträge* he sings the praises of Abba Gregorius, an Ethiopian scholar and author of grammars, dictionaries, and encyclopedias in Latin and two African languages, who visited Gotha in 1652; and of celebrated African contemporaries like “young Freidig, master musician in Vienna”;³² Angelo Soliman, a Nigerian erudite and royal tutor to the prince of Lichtenstein; Abram Petrovich Gannibal, a mathematician, engineer, and artillery colonel in the Russian army (and, unbeknownst to Blumenbach, great-grandfather of Alexander Pushkin); Geoffroy Lisle, a correspondent of the Paris Academy of the Sciences; the Maryland savant Thomas Fuller, who was legendary for his prodigious computational abilities; and black doctors, theologians, and poets writing in English, Dutch, and Latin. Blumenbach quotes directly from the already mentioned slave trader John Barbot, according to whom illiterate Africans possess “an almost unfathomably strong memory” and demonstrate “as much acumen and craft as any European merchant,” no doubt on account of “their having been so often deceived by the Europeans” (quoted in Blumenbach 1790, 93–94). With an irony not lost on European readers, Blumenbach reminds those who belittle the cultural achievements of African peoples how easy it would be “to mention considerable provinces of Europe, from out of which one would hardly expect such good writers, poets, philosophers, and correspondents of the Paris Academy” (Blumenbach 1790, 118). The chapter concludes with an emphatic statement that fully betrays the author’s exasperation at dishonest scholarship about the African race: “I don’t know . . . of any other so-called *savage* nation under the sun that has so much distinguished itself by such examples of perfectibility and even capacity for scientific culture . . . as the *Negro*” (Blumenbach 1790, 118). It remains a deplorable fact of contemporary scholarship that this and similar statements from Blumenbach’s original works are never acknowledged by commentators who are determined to prove (for reasons not easy to identify) the inherent racism of his anthropological theory.

Blumenbach counters polygenist doctrines as much through the force of empirical evidence (not least his famous skull collection) as through logical deduction: if polygenism was correct, differences among the races would

not be a matter of fluid anatomical transitions. Yet any competent comparative anatomist can testify that the races, just like individuals, differ only by degrees.

Blumenbach's monogenism is developmental but lacks Darwin's conceptions of mutation and selection, as well as a clear notion of genetic inheritance. Therefore, Blumenbach is a Lamarckian: traits acquired in new environs become inheritable over the course of a few generations. Hegel takes several pieces of wisdom directly from Blumenbach (and other Lamarckians like Peter Camper)³³ when he states, among other things: "It is apparent that blackness is due to the climate. The descendants of the Portuguese [in Africa] are . . . black like the native Negroes." Yet Hegel, perhaps mindful of Kant's rejection of the climatic hypothesis,³⁴ is also on record as boldly including a hereditary explanation for Europeans' darkening in African lands: in the 1825 lectures (Griesheim/Kehler MS) he is recorded as adding that such darkening may well happen "also through mixing" (Hegel 1978, 3:47).

Blumenbach's developmental monogenism is based on a typology of five races that he derives from comparative craniology. The variations closest to the Caucasian race are the Carib and the Malay; these in turn connect the Caucasian to the two races furthest from it, respectively the African and the Mongolian. Once more, one of Blumenbach's passages regarding the perception of aesthetic differences among the races is often cited, by contemporary proponents of his racist turn of mind, in a highly misleading and mutilated form: "Europeans . . . are . . . the most handsome of men." But the original passage differs starkly: "The *Europeans* and *Western Asians* . . . together with the *North Africans* . . . are according to European concepts of beauty [*nach den europäischen Begriffen von Schönheit*] the best formed human beings" (Blumenbach 1790, 82).

Like Linnaeus and Hegel, Blumenbach understands racial differences as neither stable nor created, but rather fluid inner-species variations resulting from geographic segregation, historic migrations, and, last but not least, sexual intercourse: "The natural scientist has still to be born who, on truthful grounds, would dare to establish a determinate boundary between [the varieties of mankind]" (Blumenbach 1790, 60).

Since Blumenbach's original writings are easily available, contemporary misrepresentations of his work are more perplexing than ever. As shown by the life sciences historian Thomas Juncker in 1998, for example, Stephen Jay Gould illustrated his claim that Blumenbach's scientific work "has promoted conventional racism ever since" (Gould 1996, 412) by rearranging Blumenbach's horizontal representation of craniums in pyramidal form.³⁵

Despite the scientific detail and logical rigor on which Blumenbach grounds his humanistic universalism, his race typology would eventually become an opportunity for others—especially in the second half of the nineteenth century—to rank races according to evaluative criteria that go well beyond those of cranial aesthetics "according to European concepts." A major tool in the

arsenal of misrepresentations of Blumenbachian anthropology that developed at the turn of the nineteenth century was the increasingly pejorative use of the Latin term *degeneratio* (simply translated in English as “degeneration”), of its German derivative *Degeneration*, and of the older Germanic terms *Ausartung* and *Abartung*. Well into the time of Blumenbach, Kant, and Hegel, these Latin and Germanic terms appear in scientific contexts in the value-neutral senses of “branching out,” “engenderment,” “derivation,” “development,” and even “conversion.” In *De Generis Humani Varietate Nativa* (1775; *On the Natural Variety of Mankind*), for example, Blumenbach inquires about the causes and ways in which, as a whole, “animalium species degenerant” and “humanum genus degeneravit,” that is, ways in which animal species and the human genus have branched out into or engendered varieties. In the *Beyträge*, he invites the reader to appreciate how the “derivation [*Degeneration*] of animals and plants from their original stock [*Stammrace*] belongs to the striking demonstrations of the variability of creation” (Blumenbach 1790, 33). In the Latin text of *De Generis*, he discusses the proto-Darwinian question of how a primal species might be said to have engendered varieties under the heading: “Quomodo species primitiva in varietates degenerat?” (Blumenbach 1775, sections 2 and 3). In the *Beyträge*, he sets out to study “Die Ausartung der organisirten Körper,” that is, “The Differentiation of Organic Bodies,” as well as the “Ausartung des vollkommensten aller Haushiere—des Menschen,” that is, “The Differentiation of the Most Perfect of All Domestic Animals—Man” (the titles of chapters 6 and 8). If *Ausartung* is rendered in English as “degeneration” in its pejorative meaning, as done by Bendyshe, Blumenbach’s chapter titles become utterly bewildering. Bendyshe’s translation of “Ausartung der organisirten Körper” as “Degeneration of Organized Bodies” is at best ambiguous, but his rendering of “Ausartung des vollkommensten aller Haushiere—des Menschen” as “Degeneration of Man, the Most Perfect of All Domestic Animals” (Blumenbach [1865] 1969, trans. Bendyshe, 293) is positively nonsensical.

In German scientific literature, the use of *Ausartung* is attested for the first time in the middle of the seventeenth century, where it indicates differentiation, including the loss of features (inborn or acquired, useful or harmful ones) and the derivation from, conversion into, or alteration into different forms.³⁶ In the 1763 essay on the concept of “negative magnitudes,” Kant writes that “the attractive force . . . close to the bodies by and by *ausartet* into a repulsive one” (Kant [1763] 1969d, 169). In the essay on the sublime and the beautiful we read that all initial feelings in marriage eventually “*ausarten* in loving intimacy” (Kant [1764] 1969a, 242). And in 1775 (“Of the Different Races of Human Beings”) Kant recommends terminological distinctions for use in biological contexts. According to his recommendations, *Ausartung* should be used for infertile cases of *Abartung* (derivation from a common stock)—a reproductive cul-de-sac. This is indeed a *biologically* negative connotation of *Ausartung*, one, however, that clearly does not apply

to the human races. In this essay Kant writes, with reference to the whole of the animal kingdom:

An animal genus [*Tiergattung*] . . . originating from a common phylum [*Stamm*] does not contain . . . different species [*Arten*] (since these signify precisely differences in phyletic origin); rather their mutual divergencies are called varieties [*Abartungen*], when hereditary. The hereditary marks of phyletic descent, when compatible with their origin, are called varietal forms [*Nachartungen*]; but should the variety no longer be capable of generating the original phyletic form, it would be called degeneration [*Ausartung*]. (Kant 1969f, 430)

With regard to the human races, Blumenbach and like-minded scholars do not follow Kant's recommendations. They continue to use *Ausartung* in the sense of "variety," including when they are referring to the human races. After all, fertility between the races was in the eighteenth century the most robust, widely known, frowned upon, and often reviled proof of monogenism.

A pejorative use of *Ausartung* began to take root during this same period in political and social contexts. "The nobility," one political economist writes in 1760, is what keeps "the unchecked monarchy from *Ausartung* into despotism" (von Justi 1760, 117). In 1781, a historian of Judaism explains that "the unnatural oppression under which Jews have lived for so many centuries has certainly contributed as much to their general ethical corruptness as to the *Ausartung* of their religious laws from their original goodness and usefulness" (von Dohm 1781, 143).

There is little doubt that the 1865 publication of Bendyshe's paraphrasing translation of Blumenbach's works, including his rendering of the German terms *Degeneration* and *Ausartung* and the Latin term *degeneratio* as "degeneration" instead of the available alternatives, contributed and is still contributing much to misreadings of Blumenbach's work.

The introduction of the pejorative connotations of *Degeneration* and *Ausartung* from sociopolitical into naturalistic (particularly racial) subject matter would eventually, in the twentieth century, restrict these words' meaning to that of the production of weaker or perverted results. But projecting these new significations indiscriminately back onto earlier uses of the words means ignoring etymological and historical fact, as well as scientific and theoretical usage. One might as well, then, construe Darwin's "descent" of man to indicate a downward movement from higher and more sophisticated life forms to lower and poorer ones.



After Blumenbach, the last major natural philosopher to think of human variation in the categories of an uncompromising universalism is Jean-Baptist

18. This refers to figures like the Dalai Lama and the Brahmin.

19. For more on Hegel's assessment of Islam, see Thompson (2013), 102–15.

20. In *PhGesch* W 12:431 Hegel connects Islamic fanaticism with political terror: “*La religion et la terreur* was here [in Islam] the principle, just as *la liberté et la terreur* was for Robespierre.” This is further discussed in chapter 7. On Hegel's connecting Islam and fanaticism, see the well-informed contributions of Thompson (2013) and Dudley (2013).

21. Due to the paradigmatic and influential character of their works, only two prominent polygenist thinkers from the seventeenth and eighteenth century are being treated in the following. For some other likely targets of Hegel's criticism, see Hegel (1978), trans. Petry, 2:449.

22. *Historisch* refers to natural history (or, depending on context, to historiography), while *geschichtlich* refers to the development of spirit. See chapter 5, section 1.

23. The disconcerting qualifier “rigid” (*starr*) that accompanies “distinctions” is consistent with the claim from the Africa lecture (discussed earlier) that the abolition of slavery in the Americas ought to be gradual rather than sudden.

24. Home (1775). All quotes are from this edition, 1:5–14.

25. Batavia was the Latin name originally given by the Romans to the Netherlands. It eventually became the modern name for the Dutch East Indies.

26. Despite Home's fondness for what he takes to be facts, the descriptions and depictions of Cochin's Jews in Malabar (southern India) since the twelfth century always refer to them as “black Jews,” consistent with their being ethnically related to Ethiopians. A very early report on the Cochin Jews is given by Benjamin of Tudela (1130–73) in *The Itinerary of Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela* (first published in 1543). (In the nineteenth century, Adolf Asher dedicated a German translation of this Hebrew text to Alexander von Humboldt.) The full translated text of the *Itinerary* can be found at <http://www.archive.org/details/itineraryofrabb01benj>. A critical edition is M. A. Adler's 1907 *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela*, accessible through Project Gutenberg at https://www.gutenberg.org/files/14981/14981-h/14981-h.htm#FNanchor_24_24.

27. See Willoughby (2010), 153–60.

28. Blumenbach (1775) and 1795 (*De Generis Humani Varietate Nativa*, first and third editions); Blumenbach (1790) and 1806 (*Beyträge zur Naturgeschichte*, first and second editions). Both works, together with further materials, were translated and edited by Thomas Bendyshe (Blumenbach [1865] 1969, trans. Bendyshe). Bendyshe's translation of the *Beyträge* is from the second edition. The quotes from Blumenbach given here are my own translations from both first editions.

29. Before acquiring a derogatory meaning, the eighteenth-century Dutch term “Hottentot” designated southern African hunter-gatherers other than Bantus.

30. Blumenbach's reference is to James Burnett, Lord Monboddo, author of metaphysical treatises, jurist, early linguist, deist, protoevolutionist, and nemesis of Henry Home. Blumenbach quotes Monboddo: “The orang-utans are proved to be of our species by marks of humanity that I think are incontestable.” Not surprisingly, the two noblemen are said to have studiously avoided each other when both residing in Edinburgh.

31. Bendyshe's distortions of Blumenbachian formulations are discussed in more detail in Michael (2017).

32. New research has revealed the identity of “young Freidig”—a household name for Blumenbach’s readers: born in Poland (ca. 1778) as Hyeronimus Hyppolitus de Augustus (ca. 1778–1830), renamed Hyeronimous Fredericus Bridgtown (eventually Bridgtower) by his father, who hailed from Bridgetown, Barbados. This child prodigy performed all over Europe, including Revolutionary Paris. Very few of his compositions survive. Beethoven originally dedicated the Kreutzer Sonata to Bridgtower. See William A. Hart, “New Light on George Bridgtower,” *Musical Times* (Autumn 2017).

33. For Camper’s *Sämmtliche Kleine Schriften* (1781–90), see Hegel (1978), trans. Petry, 2:450. Camper used craniometry before Blumenbach did. He is mostly known today for having identified prognathism as an important racial feature. While his followers associated prognathism with primitivity, Camper did not. His main discovery actually pertained to the existence of a bone shared by all primates except humans—a fact that strengthened his monogenist convictions and perhaps even his political advocacy of racial equality.

34. See Kant (1785), 1969b, 105.

35. Juncker (1998). The vertical rearrangement is printed in Gould (1996), 409. Blumenbach’s own horizontal depiction is plate 4 of *De Generis* (1795) and is reproduced as such in the appendix to Blumenbach (1865) 1969, trans. Bendyshe. Gould’s misrepresentations of other scientists’ work are documented in other cases as well; see, for example, Renschler and Monge (2008).

36. I owe this and the following etymological clarifications to Elke Gehweiler of the Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften, who provided relevant texts (the entries “Ausarten” and “Ausartung”) and commentary from the revised *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (Grimm 1965–).

37. Engels (1884).

38. Quoted in Willoughby (2010), 169.

39. Quoted in Rainger (1978), 55. Hunt’s “ethno-climatology” is deeply indebted to Henry Home’s conception of degeneracy by resettlement, discussed above in section 2.

40. See Haeckel (1868) and (1899).

41. Schleicher (1861–62).

42. On the idea of orthogenesis, see Wolpoff and Caspari (1997), chapter 8; and Bowler (1983) and (2009). From a purely conceptual perspective, orthogenesis is at the core of the vitalism of Teilhard de Chardin (who studied paleontology alongside theology) and of Henri Bergson’s idea of the *élan vital*.

43. See Goethe, *Faust* 2, lines 6255–65, quoted in chapter 2, section 2.

Chapter 5

1. Modern German’s words *geschehen* and *Geschehnis* are derived from the Old High German *scehanto*, “to turn out suddenly.”

2. Martin Heidegger’s use (in Heidegger 2003 and 2006) of *Er-eignis* as appropriation of the “seen” (using *-eignis* as if it were etymologically related to *Auge*) is of course entirely his own.

3. See Marx and Engels (1845) 1978; Marx and Engels 1956–2018, 3:21: “One can distinguish men from the animals through consciousness, through religion, through whatever else one wishes. They themselves begin to self-distinguish from the animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence . . .