

## DAVID HUME ON NATIONAL CHARACTERS AND NATIONAL SELF

The debate over national characters in the modern era concerned the ways by which we can understand the differences in manners and human characters exhibited by different cultures. It was a debate riddled with errors and prejudices regarding the understanding of grouping together the members of a nation according to the same common characteristics and uniformities or following general rules. Nevertheless, the Enlightenment in particular was a century that contributed to an opening towards other cultures, something Voltaire particularly highlighted when he referred to Eastern cultures. The concept of national identity linked to cultural and ethnic identity, was particularly discussed by philosophers and thinkers in the 18th century when they pondered on the issue of national characters and whether they are shaped by natural or moral causes. When talking of the «national character» of a people we mean the typical features that characterise them, primarily mentality and cultural features, as well as patterns of behaviour that distinguish them from other peoples, neighbouring or far away. It is generally accepted that the Greeks, Romans, English, Russians, Spanish, Jews, Chinese and other peoples have a «national character», shaped by certain features that distinguish them from another nation or even from their distant ancestors, such as in the case of the modern Greeks and Italians. From antiquity to the modern era it has been noticed that there are differences in behaviour and character between Asians and Europeans, Northerners and Southerners, Negros and Whites, or between neighbouring peoples, differences attributed to physical and moral causes. The question about the formation and differences of «national characters», connected sometimes to the issue of the rise and progress of fine arts, was posed in antiquity by Hippocrates, Strabo, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Plutarch, to mention some of the thinkers of the antiquity, but also in the modern era by many philosophers and scientists, such as Jean Bodin, F. Bacon, Thomas Sprat, William Temple, J. Dryden, Thomas Blackwell, David Hume, as well as the French Dominique Bouhours and St. Evremond, Dubos, Fontanelle, Marmontel, or Vico, philosophers who tried to examine the causes of the progress and fall of the nations as well as of the rise and progress of the arts and sciences in relation to the physical and moral causes.

David Hume seems to be particularly interested in theories emphasising the importance of climate to the formation of national characters as well as to



the rise and progress of arts from one nation to the other<sup>1</sup>. In his well-known essay entitled «Of National Characters», published in 1748, he distinguished natural causes, *i.e.* climate and environmental conditions, from moral causes, which are custom, education, economic development and form of government, in other words the political and social conditions that shape a particular region. In this essay Hume argued that the character of a nation is influenced not by physical but, primarily, by moral causes in the same way that the individuals who comprise a nation are influenced. I have to point out that Hume's criticism to theories of physical causes is indirectly connected with his endeavour to explain the «rise and progress of the arts» and directly with the judgment we form on the particular characters of different people and nations. So, his essay «Of National Characters» has to be examined in comparison with his essays «Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences», «Of Eloquence» and «Of Civic Liberty» which had been published earlier in the year 1742.

In what follows I will focus on issues of nationality that Hume discusses in his works. In his *Treatise of the Human Nature*, Hume points out that, when the society becomes numerous, it is increased to «a tribe or nation»<sup>2</sup>, and repeatedly notes that our nationalities make a difference to us most notably in the phenomenon of «national characters». According to Hume, a nation is «a collection of individuals», that have national affiliations, whose manners «are frequently determined by moral causes»<sup>3</sup>. In discussing qualities such as sharpness of mind, generosity, gaiety, or the warlike nature of different nations of ancient and modern times, Hume was to connect the national self with «national characters» and with the fact that people of the same nationality have the tendency to behave in the same way, a judgment based on observation and experience. Although he felt, as did many Scottish intellectuals, particularly anxious over issues relating to nationality and, above all, Scotland's position in a united Britain under English rule<sup>4</sup>, he nonetheless did not mention openly in his essay «Of National Characters» those keywords upon which each nationalist ideology is founded, such as language, religion, customs, traditions and art, which are considered to be criteria in the national identity of a people or nation, words which give meaning to national diversity and legitimise the cultural

1. R. MERCIER, La théorie des climats des *Réflexions critiques à L'Esprit des lois*, *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, 53, 1953, pp. 17-37 and 159-175.

2. Cf. *Treatise of Human Nature*, L. A. SELBY-BIGGE (ed.), 2nd ed. revised by P. H. Nidditch, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1978, p. 499. All the references that will follow are from this edition.

3. Cf. D. HUME, Of National Characters, in *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, revised edition, Liberty Classics, Indianapolis, Liberty Fund, 1987, pp. 189-215, esp. 198-199. All references will be from this edition.

4. Cf. D. C. AINSLIE, The Problem of the National Self in Hume's Theory of Justice, in *Hume Studies*, 21.2, 1995, pp. 289-313.





specificity of a people or nation in comparison and in contrast with other peoples or nations. Hume repeated in both the *Treatise of Human Nature* and his essay «Of National Characters», which is grouped with his historical works, the claim that each of us has a national character and, at the same time, a variety of individualised characteristics<sup>5</sup>. When he discusses national characters in the *Treatise*, he initially dismisses them as «rash», «errors», the result of «prejudice», due to «an unphilosophical species of probability, derived from *general rules* which we rashly form to ourselves»<sup>6</sup>, but later he says that observation of uniformities in the actions, «the very essence of necessity», force us to think in terms of them<sup>7</sup>. The same tension appears in the opening paragraph of his «Of National Characters» in which Hume points out that the «vulgar» overstate the force of national characters, while the «men of sense» are «prudent when they use them to form an initial assessment of strangers».

More specifically, at the beginning of his essay, Hume recognises that the common people tend to express extreme views on national characters, arguing that they believe «that any people are knavish, or cowardly, or ignorant, and will admit of no exception, but comprehend every individual under the same censure». However, he points out that: «Men of sense condemn these undistinguishing judgments; though at the same time they allow, that each nation has a peculiar set of manners, and that some particular qualities are more frequently to be met with among one people than among their neighbours». He continues his argument stating that the men of sense believe that «The common people in Switzerland have probably more honesty than those of the same rank in Ireland; and every prudent man will, from that circumstance alone, make a difference in the trust which he reposes in each. We have reason to expect greater wit and gaiety in a Frenchman than in a Spaniard; though Cervantes was born in Spain. An Englishman will naturally be supposed to have more knowledge than a Dane; though Tycho Brahe was a native of Denmark»<sup>8</sup>. Even though Hume generally rejects the conceptions we have of the «national characters» as «deceit» and the result of «prejudice»<sup>9</sup>, he ultimately accepts that the existence of similarities that can be found within

5. *Essays*, p. 203, and *Treatise*, p. 403.

6. *Treatise*, pp. 146-147: «A fourth unphilosophical species of probability is that deriv'd from *general rules* which we rashly form to ourselves, and which are the source of what we properly call *Prejudice*. An *Irishman* cannot have wit, and a *Frenchman* cannot have solidity; for which reason, tho' the conversation of the former in any instance be visibly very agreeable, and of the latter very judicious, we have entertain'd such a prejudice against them, that they must be dunces or fops in spite of sense and reason. Human nature is very subject to errors of this kind: and perhaps this nation as much as any other».

7. *Ibid.*, p. 403.

8. *Essays*, p. 198.

9. *Treatise*, pp. 146-147.



nations enables us to think in a similar fashion to the common people<sup>10</sup>, and to attribute specific qualities to certain nations, qualities that he does not believe that are the result of the climate and the winds, as had been excessively emphasised from antiquity until his time, but due to custom, education, and form of government. He would go even further in his essay and comment upon the characteristics of the peoples of antiquity, such as the Greek, the Roman, Chinese or Jewish, and sometimes make comparisons between them and other peoples, such as the Turks, Spaniards, or Icelandic, emphasising more generally that the reasons given for national characters are explained sometimes by physical and other times by moral causes: «Different reasons are assigned for these *national characters*; while some account for them from moral, others from physical causes. By *moral* causes, I mean all circumstances, which are fitted to work on the mind as motives or reasons, and which render a peculiar set of manners habitual to us. Of this kind are, the nature of the government, the revolutions of public affairs, or penury in which the people live, the situation of the nation with regard to its neighbours, and such like circumstances. By *physical* causes I mean those qualities of the air and climate, which are supposed to work insensibly on the temper, by altering the tone and habit of the body, and giving a particular complexion, which, through reflection and reason may sometimes overcome it, will yet prevail among the generality of mankind, and have an influence on their manners»<sup>11</sup>.

Hume appears to have known of the famous theory of Hippocrates and his School, that the natural environment and its qualities, primarily air and climate, shape people's character. He seems to criticise this theory, although he does not refer to it directly, while citing Strabo, according to whom most arts and spiritual qualities could flourish in any climate and their progress depends on moral causes. Hippocrates certainly mentions climatic differences between Asian and European countries and correlates them with the peculiarities of their inhabitants, pointing to the joylessness and unmanliness of the people of Asia, describing them as gentler and unwarlike in comparison with the Europeans, who are more spirited, although he does not seem to overlook the moral causes that also shape them<sup>12</sup>.

Hume seems to know a wide literature connected with the role of climate in the formation of the arts and the national characters, referring to opinions about the character traits that differentiate Asians and Europeans, or people

10. *Treatise*, p. 403.

11. *Essays*, p. 199.

12. *On Airs, Waters, and Places*, 41, 1277-1288, 54, 1531-1537, 49, 1455-1456, 40, 1538-1548. In antiquity, Aristotle argued for the influence of environment in relation to the physiological and intellectual differences between Asians, Greeks and other European races. Cf. ARISTOTLE, *Posterior Analytics*, A, 13, 78 b 30, and *Politics*, H, 7, 1327 b 23.



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

Hume arguing that national characters are not determined by the effects of air or climate but mainly by moral causes, such as education and customs, as well as forms of government, resorts to experience and history. Of the many observations he makes on the peoples of antiquity and of his contemporary reality, I will focus my attention on what he says about the ancient Greeks and the modern Greeks. He first argues that, in small neighbouring polities, where environmental differences do not exist, the peoples have different characteristics and can be as different in their manners as with the most distant nations. He thus turns to the examples of the Athenians, who were famed for being ingenious, polite and gay, and the Thebans, who were known for being dull, simple and cold: «In small governments, which are contiguous, the people have notwithstanding a different character, and are often as distinguishable in their manners as the most distant nations. Athens and Thebes were but a short day's

13. *Essays*, p. 198.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 199.

15. *Ibid.*



journey from each other; though the Athenians were as remarkable for ingenuity, politeness, and gaiety, as the Thebans for dulness, rusticity, and a phlegmatic temper»<sup>16</sup>. Citing the ancient geographer Strabo, who in Book II of his *Geography* (3, 7) rejected wholesale the influence of climate upon both men and animals, stressing the role of custom and education, Hume points out that: «It is not from nature, that the Athenians are learned, the Lacedemonians ignorant, and the Thebans too, who are still nearer neighbours to the former. Even the difference of animals [Strabo adds] depends not on climate»<sup>17</sup>. Hume, then, makes comparisons between different peoples, in relation to moral causes, and documents various cases which he believes confirm his positions. Thus, in comparing the modern Greeks and the Turks, he argues that, «The integrity, gravity, and bravery of the Turks, form an exact contrast to the deceit, levity, and cowardice of the modern Greeks»<sup>18</sup>, in order to support his view that: «a difference in language or religion, keeps two nations, inhabiting the same country, from mixing with each other, they will preserve, during several centuries, a distinct and even opposite set of manners»<sup>19</sup>. He supports his conviction that the manners of a people change considerably from one age to another due to changes in their government, the intermarriage with new people or the general inconstancy to which all human affairs are subject, and, by comparing the ancient with the modern Greeks says: «The ingenuity, industry, and activity of the ancient Greeks have nothing in common with the stupidity and indolence of the present inhabitants of those regions»<sup>20</sup>.

I shall focus on Hume's opinion cited above regarding the differences of moral and personal qualities of ancient and modern Greeks who in the above quotation are named as «the present inhabitants of those regions». We know that Hume's *Essays* and his *History of England* were received warmly in Britain and on the Continent, and continued to be read widely for more than a century after his death. *The History of England* as well as the *Essays* seemed to attract the interest of the prerevolutionary Greeks who lived abroad, who in the first decades of the 19th century made particular mention of his «Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations», «Of National Characters» and his much admired *History of England*. The widely respected and eminent classicist and political theorist Adamantios Korais (1748-1833)<sup>21</sup>, a Greek enlightener who

16. *Ibid.*, p. 204.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 202, note.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 205.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*, p. 206.

21. Korais, who had earlier studied medicine at Montpellier, lived as an intellectual activist in Paris, and was well known among the French ideologues as well as among the circles of the European philologists. Cf. R. D. ARGYROPOULOS, Adamance Coray et sa



devoted his life to editing, annotating and translating into French or modern Greek many ancient and modern medical, philosophical and literary texts for the benefit of his countrymen living under foreign occupation, cites and discusses Hume in his *Discours Préliminaire sur le Traité d'Hippocrate «Des airs, des eaux et des lieux»*. Korais published this work in Paris in 1800 in the hope of benefiting not only doctors, but also historians, cosmographers and politicians<sup>22</sup>. In his *Discours Préliminaire*, the Greek intellectual discusses the influence of climate on man and mentions Hume's essay «Of National Characters», particularly his view that differences between peoples derive more from «moral causes» such as governments, than from «physical causes» such as climate or air. Korais himself thought that both physical and moral causes influenced peoples, and he rejected Hume's views about the uniformity of character among both the Chinese and the Jews, even though they lived under different geographical conditions<sup>23</sup>, as Hume suggests in his *Essay «Of National Characters»*. Curiously enough, he does not criticise Hume's views on the national character of the ancient and modern Greeks neither their comparison with the Turks, and he cites it only to argue against physical causes, noting that Hume misread Strabo in his efforts to deny the influence of climate,

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réflexion philosophique: vers une anthropologie médicale et culturelle, in P. M. KITROMILIDES (ed.), *Adamantios Korais and the European Enlightenment*, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 2010, pp. 187-212. Korais was nominated member of the Société des Observateurs de l'homme (1799-1805), in which he developed bonds of friendship with other Observateurs such as Destutt de Tracy, Silvestre de Sacy, P. C. F. Daunou, Fr. Thurot, E. Clavier. Cf. Ph. ILIOU, *Stin trochia ton Ideologon: Korais, Daunou, Fournarakis*, *Chiaka Chronika*, 10, 1982, pp. 36-68.

22. For the reception of his editorial work on ancient texts in Britain, and especially for his corrections on the medical work of Hippocrates, which Korais had made relying upon previous editions, cf. V. PERRAKY, *L'histoire britannique de Coray: une histoire de manuscrits (1789-1803)*, in P. M. KITROMILIDES (ed.), *supra*, pp. 37-90.

23. Cf. A. CORAY, *Discours préliminaire sur le «Traité d'Hippocrate des airs, des eaux et des lieux»*, Premier partie, «De l'influence du Climat sur l'homme», A. CORAY (ed.), Paris, 1800, pp. 30-35. Between 1782 and 1805, Korais had edited and published a series of texts, some of them critical editions of ancient Greek authors. He was interested in the medical studies as he had studied medicine in the School of Medicine in Montpellier, and his study of Hippocrates' work had as a result the publication in the above mentioned series of a book entitled *Traité d'Hippocrate des airs, des eaux et des lieux*, traduction nouvelle, avec le text grec collationné sur discours préliminaire, des notes critiques, historiques et médicales, un discours préliminaire, un tableau comparatif des vents anciens et modernes, une carte géographique et les index nécessaires, par A. CORAY, Docteur en Médecine de la ci-devant Faculté de Montpellier, vol. I, Paris, Baudelot et Eberhart, 1800. Korais is using the English edition of Hume's works entitled *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects* (1784: vol. 1, p. 217). Cf. *Of National Characters*, in *The Philosophical Works of David Hume*, T. H. GREEN and T. H. GROSE (eds), vol. 3, London, 1889, p. 248.





since Strabo held that physical and moral causes influenced man equally<sup>24</sup>. Korais, born on April 27th of the year in which Hume's essay was published, has not taken offence at Hume's description of modern Greeks described by him, in comparison with the Ancients, characterised as ingenuine, industrious, and active, as being stupid and indolent; Korais' indifferent attitude to this comment would be explained as he was thinking that this view, widely held at that time, was correct, as learning among his compatriots was the principal cause of their predicament due to their Ottoman dominion for more than 300 years<sup>25</sup>. Actually, the Greek intellectual found the preparation and publication of classical Greek authors as the «only means» of the rediscovery of the ancestors and the advancement of learning, by which national awareness and progress could be achieved.

On the other hand, Evangelos Papanoutsos (1900-1982), a contemporary Greek philosopher and translator of Hume's *Essays*, seems to have been the first to comment, in footnotes, on Hume's opinions of the national character of the modern Greeks, pointing out that he would not comment on Hume's view because these criticisms were common among Europeans of the time who had no first hand knowledge of the character of modern Greeks<sup>26</sup>. I have to comment here that in the 18th and 19th centuries European intellectuals were feeling enthusiasm and expressed admiration for ancient Greece and its achievements while they had a vague idea about the Greece of their own day. Modern Greece was for the most of them a backward and uninviting country, which had lost its liberties and seemed more deserving of pity than of admiration. Most of them were not sharing the hopes of the philhellenes that the Greek revolution would mark the real beginning of Greek regeneration. Especially in the 19th century the British used the idea of character in order to justify colonisation and rule over other lands and peoples. The British were considering as moral virtues characteristics like «self-restraint, perseverance,

24. *Discours Préliminaire sur le Traité d'Hippocrate «Des airs, des eaux et des lieux»*, op. cit.

25. I. D. EVRIGENIS, *Enlightenment, emancipation, and national identity: Korais and the Ancients*, in P. M. KITROMILIDES (ed.), *supra*, pp. 91-108, especially p. 91; Evrigenis comments on this view and cites in parallel J. Locke's opinion about modern Greeks, the enslaved descendants of the original possessors of a country to 'retain a Right to the Possession of their Ancenstors': «Who doubts but the Grecian Christians descendants of the ancient possessors of the Country may justly cast off the Turkish yoke which they have so long groaned under when ever they have a power to do it?», in JOHN LOCKE, *Two Treatises of Government*, P. LASLETT (ed.), Cambridge, 1960, II, § 192.

26. D. HUME, *Dokimia Oikonomika-Istorika-Politikokoinonika*, translated by Evangelos Papanoutsos, Athina, Papazissis, 1979, pp. 148-164, esp. 156. On the issue of the national characters, cf. also E. PAPANOUTSOS, *Ethnikoi characteres: Physika einai ta aitia tous, e ethika?*, *Aphieroma ston K. Tsatso*, Athinai, Ant. N. Sakkoulas, 1980, pp. 187-191.



strenuous effort, effort in the face of adversity and duty» traits that contribute to the social development of the individual and of the society<sup>27</sup>. They considered themselves different from other nationalities, including fellow Europeans like French, Germans and other nations, attributing to themselves a distinct ethnic identity. They developed from pre-existing conceptions of other nationalities opinions that rank them according to race and culture, and when they ruled the Ionian Islands, from 1815 till 1864, they based their government on «hierarchy and racial superiority»; in the official correspondence between British officials and the colonial Office Ionians were characterised as «children», «corrupt», «immoral», «dirty», descriptions justifying British imperial rule<sup>28</sup>.

Coming back to the Enlightenment's perceptions of the Orient, overseas exploration and discoveries worked to undermine Western self-assurance and complacency. The Chinese had a society that seemed admirable in many ways even if it was not Christian. What Voltaire found in the Chinese, other thinkers found in real or imagined others that constituted the Asian diversity. China, considered as «oriental», became a separate object of study due to rapid information about it. For the most Europeans the essential «Orient» narrowed itself to the Ottoman Empire, Persia and Mughal India and «Orientals» were by definition Muslims, endowed with cultures that seemed to have much in common. Real or imagined voyages flourished in the works of such philosophers like Bernard de Fontenelle, the chevalier Ramsay, Denis Diderot, Constantin-François de Volney. Works like the letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, detailing a trip to Constantinople, encouraged a tolerance of others and a new wiliness to accept innovations from them. Many Europeans appreciated the luxury of the East and especially of the Ottoman Empire that in their mind was the «other», «the different» mostly because of the different culture, customs, arts, and music; the «alla turca» style was *à la mode* in some European musical works and had attracted the European imagination in artistic affairs depending on the political relations of Europeans with the Ottoman Empire. Muhammad was shown at that time as a major figure in secular history with heroic characteristics, and not as an impostor able to chastise erring Christians.

Hume appears to have great appreciation for the Turks, as he compares them with ancient Romans, noting that, «The ancient Romans seem to have been a candid sincere people, as are the modern Turks»<sup>29</sup>. He also appreciated

27. S. COLLINI, The idea of character in Victorian political thought, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, London, 1985, p. 31, as cited by Maria Paschalidi, *Constructing Ionian Identities: The Ionian Islands in British Official Discourses: 1815-1864*, PhD, Department of History, University College London, 2009, p. 39.

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 41-42.

29. *Of National Characters*, p. 211.



the English more than the Scots: «the English are the most remarkable of any people that perhaps ever were in the world. Nor is this to be ascribed to the mutability and uncertainty of their climate, or any other physical causes; since all these causes take place in the neighbouring country of Scotland, without having the same effect»<sup>30</sup>. On the other hand he compares the English to the ancient Greeks: «Who can doubt, but the English are at present a more polite and knowing people than the Greeks were for several ages after the siege of Troy? Yet is there no comparison between the languages of Milton and that of Homer?»<sup>31</sup>. Emphasising the value of democratic government that is connected with the progress of the peoples and the arts, he notes that national groups, for example the ancient Greeks, who lived in different climatic and cultural environments and in the same space, had different characteristics, such as the Athenians, the Lacedemonians and the Thebans did. Hume explains, with the issue of moral causes, differences caused by imitation of foreign habits, mentioning the soldiers of Alexander who changed their behaviour and became debauched and drinkers, when they imitated the Persians, although he admits that in their case we have to take under consideration the geographical and physical causes<sup>32</sup>. That is apparent when he speaks about the democratic politics of ancient Greece that made possible the rise and progress of arts and philosophy, when he states, noticing the importance of cultural factors such as language and religion as well as the importance of the climate and geographical place in his essay «Of the rise and progress of arts and sciences», that «Greece was a cluster of little principalities, which soon became republics; and being united both by their neighbourhood, and by the ties of the same language and interest, they entered into the closest intercourse of commerce and learning. There concurred a happy climate, a soil not infertile, and a most harmonious and comprehensive language; so that every circumstance among the people seemed to favour the rise of the arts and sciences. Each city produced its several artists and philosophers, who refused to yield the preference to those of the neighbouring republics»<sup>33</sup>.

Discussing the problem of the natural and moral causes as far as the moulding of the national characters, Hume turns primarily against Abbé Dubos, who argued for the importance of natural causes in the formation of national character, mentioning two moral causes, the «fixed» and the «accidental»<sup>34</sup>. The former are connected to the government of a society and with specific professions, such as the priesthood, but these are not fixed for the

30. *Ibid.*, 207.

31. *Ibid.*, 209.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 214.

33. The Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences, *Essays*, pp. 120-121.

34. Of National Characters, *Essays*, p. 203.



national self, which is also influenced by accidental causes, such as an important historical figure or the feeling of sympathy. It seems that he knew the views of Greek and Roman authors, like Hippocrates, Strabo, Caesar and Livy, as well as of the Europeans, such as Abbé Dubos<sup>35</sup>, Montesquieu<sup>36</sup>, Malebranche<sup>37</sup>, who gives his version of the climate theory linking it to the debate over national characters, or Fontenelle<sup>38</sup>; all these thinkers had endorsed the idea that climate has a significant effect on character and shapes the national characters although the latter has also stressed the importance of the historical and social environment in the formation of the cultural and intellectual achievements of an era. Hume mentions Bacon's opinion concerning «the inhabitants of the south that are, in general, more ingenious than those of the north»<sup>39</sup>. I can mention here Bolingbroke, who stressed the importance of education, custom and example in the formation of national characters<sup>40</sup> and G. Turnbull<sup>41</sup>, thinkers who pointed out the role of good education in the flourishing of arts and sciences, or the Scottish classical scholar Thomas Blackwell<sup>42</sup>, who, although he considered the role of moral causes as very important in the flourishing of the human spirit, he uses widely the theory of climate in order to explain the formation of a genius such as Homer. Hume, being in favour of moral causes, also mentions in his *Essay* the role of forms of government in determining national character, although he states that Scotland and England both come under the same government although they have distinct national characters<sup>43</sup>, something that is absent in his first treatment of the issue in the *Treatise*<sup>44</sup>. Moreover, in *The History of*

35. Abbé DUBOS, *Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting*, vol. 2, translated by T. Nugent, London, John Nours, 1748.

36. Charles-Luis Secondat, baron DE MONTESQUIEU, *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), translated by A. M. Cohler, B. C. Miller, and H. Stone, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1989. This was an extremely influential work in the history of political theory and sociology, approaching different forms of government and developing a theory of the influence of climate on political and social organisation. This work established him as a leading figure in the intellectual circles of France.

37. N. MALEBRANCHE, *The Search After Truth* (1674-75), translated by T. M. Lennon and P. J. O'Connell, Columbus, Ohio State UP, 1980, pp. 94-95.

38. Bernard le Bovier DE FONTENELLE, *Digression sur les anciens et les modernes* (1688).

39. *Of National Characters*, p. 211.

40. H. Saint John BOLINGBROKE, *Letters on the Study and Use of History* (1752) in *Works*, D. Mallet (ed.), Hildesheim, 1968, vol. II, pp. 292 ff.

41. G. TURNBULL, *A Treatise on Ancient Painting, Containing Observations on the Rise, Progress and Decline of that Art...*, printed by the author and sold by A. Millar, London, 1740.

42. Th. BLACKWELL, *An Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (1735), Hildesheim-New York, 1976.

43. *Of National Characters*, p. 207.

44. *Treatise*, pp. 316-317.



*England* he says that the determination of the form of government depends in part on the character of the people<sup>45</sup>. As far as this view goes, he notes that the activities required by a particular form of government will also affect its citizens' behaviour. As he states, eloquence is part of the character of a nation with a «popular» government<sup>46</sup>, and a character for superstition will often be associated with monarchies because it is in the interest of monarchs to promote reverence for religion as a means to bolster reverence for their own power<sup>47</sup>. In the same essay Hume also observes, mentioning Europe and particularly Greece in relation to geographical and environmental reasons, that make possible the progress of arts and sciences, that «Europe, of all the four parts of the world, is the most broken by seas, rivers, and mountains: and Greece of all countries of Europe. Hence these regions were naturally divided into several distinct governments. And hence the sciences arose in Greece; and Europe has been hitherto the most constant habitation of them»<sup>48</sup>. In addition, he, on the one hand, mentions Longinus and several other eminent modern writers, like Addison and Lord Shaftesbury, who asserted that the arts and sciences could never flourish but in a free government<sup>49</sup>; on the other hand, he mentions cities like Rome and Florence which had lost their liberty in Renaissance, but led all the fine arts to perfection. For him the most eminent instance of the flourishing of learning in absolute governments is France whose people, except the Greeks, have been at once philosophers, poets, orators, historians, painters, architects, sculptors, and musicians<sup>50</sup>. As far as the politeness of manners in the modern era, he thinks that it arose most naturally in monarchies and courts where the liberal arts flourished: «The republics in Europe are at present noted for want of politeness. The good-manners of a Swiss civilised in Holland is an expression for rusticity among the French. The English, in some degree, fall under the same censure, notwithstanding their learning and genius. And if the Venetians be an exception to the rule, they owe it, perhaps to their communication with the other Italians, most of whose governments beget a dependence more than sufficient for civilizing their manners»<sup>51</sup>.

More generally, Hume believes, in the framework of his moral psychology<sup>52</sup>,

45. *The History of England*, W. B. TODD (ed.), Indianapolis, Liberty Fund, 1987, vol. IV, App. iii, pp. 384-385.

46. *The Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences, Essays*, p. 119.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 126.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 123.

49. *On Civil Liberty, Essays*, p. 91.

50. *Ibid.*

51. *Ibid.*, p. 127.

52. Cf. J. MCINTYRE, *Character: A Humean Account, History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 7, 1990, pp. 193-206.



that «characters are the causes of actions and the objects of moral assessment; that is, we understand people's actions by relating them to their character-sources, which in turn cause the moral sentiments»<sup>53</sup>. He notes that we must distinguish between acts which are the result of the fact that we have grown up in a specific national culture, and those which are associated with the individual character and the personal self. Hume argues, moreover, in reference to the national characters of different peoples, that the convictions we have formed on the differentiability between national characters lead us to make generalisations or to have misconceptions regarding someone's behaviour, until we are able to get to know him as a character. So, given that the French have a national character for gaiety, when we find out that a happy person is French, we will see their happiness not so much as a reflection of oneself, but rather as a reflection of their nationality. Of course, Hume knows that causal generalisations often lead to mere prejudice, as we tend to link nationality with individual behaviour, and he argues that the «causal generalisations» we make are usually marked by prejudice<sup>54</sup>. Hume, as a Scot, often felt the force of vulgar misconceptions when in England, while he was more relaxed when in France where there was a less prejudiced attitude towards Scots. But, as far as the Modern Greeks go, it seems that he had a prejudiced attitude and not an open mind, although he was convinced that openness of mind is the result of experiencing others by travelling and discovering what the different manners or characters of other nations are really like<sup>55</sup>.

Arthur Schopenhauer in his *Aphorismen zur Lebensweisheit* points out that every living being lives as that which it is («Von dem, was einer ist»), as that which it has («Von dem, was einer hat») and as that which represents to the others («Von dem, was einer vorstellt»). Hume's opinion on the national characteristics of modern Greeks, as well as other south nations, reminds us the criticism we, as contemporary Greeks, recently came across vis-à-vis the political and economic crisis, as expressed by German public opinion, who tended to accuse the Greek people as corrupt, liars, and lazy, a criticism based on puritan popular morality and on racial prejudices. It is odd enough to accuse a whole nation in this way, especially the Germans who with the

53. *Treatise*, p. 575.

54. Cf. D. C. AINSLIE, *The problem of the National Self in Hume's Theory of Justice*, pp. 296-297.

55. D. HUME, *History of England: From the Invention of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688* (1754-62), 6 vols, Indianapolis, Liberty Classics, 1983-1985, vol. I, p. 126. I have to notice here Hume's views on the inferiority of the Negro (*Of National Characters*, p. 208), although he was opposed to the institution of slavery (*Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations*, in *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary*, Part II (1752), ed. by E.F. MILLER, *op. cit.*, p. 384, n. 7).



romanticizing of antiquity of such thinkers as Weber, Heidegger, Freud, Marcuse, Arendt, Gadamer and Habermas, have transformed their understanding of the modern self, of political community and of Enlightenment rationality. Hume recognises that differentiability, typically associated with sympathy, allows him to have sympathy with co-nationals and show less sympathy for foreigners in matters of justice, but we have to admit that his views on national characters and the national self of modern Europeans are generalisations due to different sources and not accurate observations. We also have to consider his opinion about ancient nations as he admits the importance of physical and environmental causes, but in most cases, in his effort to point out the factors that have an influence on the development of the arts and the national characters, he denies the view that physical environment could essentially determine it; so he refers to the historical and social environment. His explanations from the methodological point of view entail a negation of the physiological explanation and of the causal explanation as he notices that national characters or artistic affairs are often subject to accidental factors or to change. We have to admit that his interpretation of the national self and the arts is based on social institutions and collective forms of behaviour which show his linking of arts with the activity of a whole nation.

Hume uses the word «character» primarily to mean what we would call a «character trait» or the structured group of such traits that make up someone's personality that is «her character» and accordingly, a «national character» consists of a set of characteristics for various qualities. As A. Baier indicates a person might be said to have individual character traits for generosity, raillery, and tennis, a national character that includes courage and the love of liberty, and an admirable character, *i.e.* personality<sup>56</sup>. It seems also that Hume's views are connected with the so called «Ancient – Modern Controversy» over whether the intellectual culture of the moderns was comparable with that of the ancients, a controversy using either climatic or moral accounts of national characters in support of the views of partisans of both sides<sup>57</sup>. Hume discusses the Ancient – Modern controversy in a number of his essays, mostly in «Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations» and «Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences» and provides us with clear views concerning important discussions of national characters of ancient and modern nations and states.

The subject of national characters is linked to the meanings of ethnicity

56. A. BAIER, *A Progress of Sentiments: Reflections on Hume's Treatise*, Cambridge, Harvard UP, 1991, pp. 252-253.

57. Cf. M. CARDY, Discussion of the Theory of Climate in the Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes, *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 163, 1976, pp. 73-88; E. C. MOSSNER, Hume and the Ancient-Modern Controversy, 1725-1752: A Study in Creative Scepticism, *University of Texas Studies in English*, 28, 1949, pp. 139-153.



and nation-states. Undoubtedly, in the 18th and 19th century, nations proved to be the great personalities of history and the particular characteristics of each one came to be seen not only as a result of the natural environment but, primarily, as a product of social, historical, intellectual and political factors. When talking specifically on the subject of European cultural identity and the importance of national cultures in the progress and development of European civilisation, John Stuart Mill wrote characteristically: «What has made the European family of nations an improving, instead of a stationary portion of mankind? Not any superior excellence in them, which when it exists, exists as the effect, not as the cause; but their remarkable diversity of character and culture. Individuals, classes, nations, have been extremely unlike one another: they have struck out a great variety of paths, each leading to something valuable... Europe is, in my judgment, wholly indebted to this plurality of paths for its progressive and many-sided development»<sup>58</sup>. Even though the 19th century emphasised the importance of national cultures, it also supported the excellence of individuality and freedom of action and discouraged obedience to types. Even so, the Enlightenment was the century which made an opening to other cultures and heterogeneity, as Voltaire pointed out when talking of the civilisations of the East, such as the Chinese. He was the first to discuss the concept of differentiality<sup>59</sup> as well as that of religious tolerance, which he saw not so much as a concept but as an outlook on life<sup>60</sup>.

The concepts of identity and difference are a subject of research in contemporary cultural studies, and for this reason those who argue in favour of the construction of identity often base their arguments on a distinction between two forms or models of their production, in an attempt to make a historical rather than a theoretical distinction between identities<sup>61</sup>. The first model presupposes that there exists a native and substantive content to each identity, which is determined by either a common descent or a common

58. John Stuart MILL, *On Liberty* (1859), in S. COLLINI (ed.), *John Stuart Mill On Liberty and Other Essays*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1989 (Greek transl., Athens, Epikouros, 1985, p. 125).

59. Cf. VOLTAIRE, *Essai sur les Mœurs et l'Esprit des Nations*, R. POMEAU (ed.), 2 vols, Paris, Garnier, 1963. Cf. also J. SCHLOBACH, *La découverte des cultures au XVIIIe siècle*, Conférence annuelle C. Th. Dimaras, 1996 (Ἡ ἀνακάλυψη τῶν πολιτισμῶν στὸν 18ο αἰῶνα, Greek translation by Rania Polykandrioti), Department of Neohellenic Research, National Hellenic Research Foundation, Athens 1997.

60. Cf. VOLTAIRE, *Traité sur tolérance*, critical edition by John Renwick, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 2000. Cf. also, Cl. LAURIOL, *Voltaire et l'affaire Calas. De l'histoire au myth*, Conférence annuelle C. Th. Dimaras, 2005, (Ὁ Βολταίρος καὶ ἡ ὑπόθεση Καλάς. Ἀπὸ τὴν ἱστορία στὸν μύθο, Greek transl. A. Tabaki), Department of Neohellenic Research, National Hellenic Research Foundation, Athens, 2006.

61. Cf. S. HALL, Cultural Identity and Diaspora, in J. RUTHERFORD (ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1990, pp. 222-237.



structure of experience or by both of these elements, and attempts to discover the «authentic» and «genuine» content of this identity. The second model denies the existence of separate or distinct identities, which are instead believed to be based on a universal common descent and experience. It argues that identities are always relative and incomplete during the process of their formation, so consequently identity is the opportunistic and unstable result of relations, which defines identities by emphasising the differences<sup>62</sup>. Hume followed the Enlightenment attitude to the examination of the other, appreciating «ethnological» traits. In between these opposing views, there are other approaches that lay greater emphasis on the historical and symbolic/cultural characteristics of national identity. All those who consider the ethnic group as a kind of cultural community that highlights the role of mythical descent and historical memories and makes it unrecognisable on the basis of one or more cultural differences, such as religion, customs, traditions, language and institutions<sup>63</sup>, acknowledge that the elements of a common name, common descent, common historical memory, and one or many differentiated elements of a common culture create among the peoples a sense of solidarity, that is linked to the bond to a particular homeland<sup>64</sup>.

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

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62. IDEM, The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity, in A. KING (ed.), *Culture, Globalization and the World-System*, London, Macmillan, 1991, pp. 19-39, esp. p. 21. On the issue of identity and difference as regards cultural studies, cf. L. GROSSBERG, *Identity and Cultural Studies: Is that all there is?*, *American Cultural Studies. A Reader*, J. HARTLEY and R. E. PEARSON (eds), Oxford, Oxford UP, 2000, pp. 114-121.

63. Cf. A. D. SMITH, *National identity*, Reno, University of Nevada Press, 1991 (Greek transl. E. Peppas, Athina, Odysseas, 2000, pp. 38-40).

64. *Ibid.*



## DAVID HUME: «ΠΕΡΙ ΤΩΝ ΕΘΝΙΚΩΝ ΧΑΡΑΚΤΗΡΩΝ»

## Περίληψη

Ἡ ἔννοια τῆς ἐθνικῆς ταυτότητας συνδέεται μὲ αὐτὴν τῆς πολιτισμικῆς καὶ ἀπασχόλησε ἰδιαίτερα τοὺς φιλοσόφους κατὰ τὸν 18ο αἰώνα, ὅταν αὐτοὶ στοχάστηκαν γύρω ἀπὸ τὸ θέμα τῶν ἐθνικῶν χαρακτήρων καὶ γιὰ τὸ κατὰ πόσον αὐτοὶ διαμορφώνονται ἀπὸ φυσικὲς ἢ ἠθικὲς αἰτίες. Κάνοντας λόγο γιὰ «ἐθνικὸν χαρακτήρα» ἑνὸς λαοῦ ἀναφερόμαστε σὲ τυπικὰ γνωρίσματα ποὺ τὸν χαρακτηρίζουν, κυρίως σὲ ψυχικὲς καὶ πνευματικὲς ιδιότητες ἀλλὰ καὶ τρόπους συμπεριφορᾶς ποὺ τὸν διαφοροποιοῦν ἀπὸ ἄλλους λαούς, γειτονικοὺς ἢ μακρινούς. Κατὰ γενικὴ ὁμολογία ὑπάρχει ἓνας «ἐθνικὸς χαρακτήρας» τῶν Ἑλλήνων, τῶν Ρωμαίων, τῶν Ἀγγλῶν, τῶν Ρώσων, τῶν Ἰσπανῶν, τῶν Ἑβραίων, τῶν Κινέζων καὶ ἄλλων λαῶν, ὁ ὁποῖος συγκροτεῖται ἀπὸ γνωρίσματα ποὺ τὸν διαφοροποιοῦν ἀπὸ ἄλλους λαούς ἢ ἀκόμη καὶ ἀπὸ τοὺς μακρινούς προγόνους του, ὅπως λ.χ. ἡ περίπτωση τῶν Ἑλλήνων καὶ τῶν Ἰταλῶν. Ἔχουν, ἐπίσης, διαπιστωθεῖ διαφοροποιήσεις συμπεριφορᾶς καὶ χαρακτήρα μεταξὺ λευκῶν καὶ μαύρων, Ἀσιατῶν καὶ Εὐρωπαίων, μεταξὺ Βορείων καὶ Νοτίων, ἢ μεταξὺ ὁμοίων λαῶν. Πῶς ὅμως διαμορφώνονται οἱ «ἐθνικοὶ χαρακτήρες»; Ἀπὸ φυσικὲς ἢ ἠθικὲς αἰτίες; Τὸ ἐρώτημα αὐτὸ τέθηκε στὴν ἀρχαιότητα ἀπὸ τὸν Ἱπποκράτη καὶ τὸν Στράβωνα ἀλλὰ καὶ στὴν ἐποχὴ τῆς νεωτερικότητος ἀπὸ πολλοὺς φιλοσόφους καὶ ἐπιστήμονες. Στὸν 18ο αἰώνα ὁ David Hume, διακρίνοντας τίς φυσικὲς αἰτίες, δηλαδὴ τίς κλιματολογικὲς καὶ γεωγραφικὰς συνθήκες, ἀπὸ τίς ἠθικὲς, ποὺ εἶναι ἡ συνήθεια, ἡ ἐκπαίδευση, ἡ οικονομικὴ ἀνάπτυξη καὶ ἡ μορφή διακυβέρνησης, δηλαδὴ πολιτικὲς καὶ κοινωνικὲς συνθήκες ποὺ διαμορφώνονται σὲ μιὰ συγκεκριμένη περίοδον, στὸ γνωστὸ δοκίμιό του ποὺ τιτλοφορεῖται «On National Characters» προσπάθησε νὰ ἀπαντήσει στὸ ὡς ἄνω ἐρώτημα. Σὲ αὐτὸ ὑποστηρίζει ὅτι ὁ χαρακτήρας ἑνὸς ἔθνους ἐπηρεάζεται ὀχι ἀπὸ φυσικὰ ἀλλὰ κυρίως ἀπὸ ἠθικὰ αἰτία κατὰ τὸν ἴδιο τρόπο μὲ τὸν ὁποῖο ἐπηρεάζονται καὶ τὰ ἄτομα ποὺ συγκροτοῦν ἓνα ἔθνος. Ἀναφερόμενος σὲ ποιότητες, ὅπως ἡ ὀξύτητα τοῦ πνεύματος, ἡ γενναιότητα, ἡ εὐθυμία, ἡ τὸ πολεμοχαρὲς διαφόρων ἐθνῶν τῆς ἀρχαιότητος καὶ τῶν νεώτερων χρόνων, ὁ Hume θὰ συνδέσει τὸ ἐθνικὸ ἐγὼ μὲ τοὺς «ἐθνικοὺς χαρακτήρες» καὶ θὰ ὑποστηρίξει ὅτι ἄτομα τῆς ἴδιας ἐθνικότητος ἔχουν τὴν τάση νὰ ἐνεργοῦν μὲ τὸν ἴδιο τρόπο.

Ὁ Hume ἐπαναλαμβάνει τόσο στὸ *Treatise on the Human Nature* ὅσο καὶ στὸ δοκίμιον «On National Characters», τὸ ὁποῖον ἐντάσσεται στὰ ἱστορικά του δοκίμια, πῶς κάθε ἓνας ἀπὸ μᾶς ἔχει τὸν ἐθνικὸν του χαρακτήρα καὶ συγχρόνως ποικίλα ἑξατομικευμένα χαρακτηριστικά. Ἄν καὶ γενικὰ ἀπορρίπτει τοὺς «ἐθνικοὺς χαρακτήρες», ὡς «πλάνες» καὶ ἀποτελέσματα «προκατάληψης», τίς γενικεύσεις, καὶ τελικὰ παραδέχεται πῶς ἡ παρατήρηση ὁμοιομορφιῶν συμπεριφορᾶς ποὺ ἀνευρίσκονται στὰ ἔθνη, μᾶς προτρέπει νὰ σκεπτόμαστε παρόμοια μὲ τοὺς κοινούς ἀνθρώπους καὶ νὰ ἀποδίδουμε συγκεκριμένα γνωρίσματα σὲ ὁρισμένα ἔθνη, γνωρίσματα ποὺ δὲν θεωρεῖ πῶς εἶναι ἀποτελέσματα τοῦ κλίματος καὶ τοῦ ἀέρος, ὅπως ἔχει ὑπερβολικὰ τονιστεῖ ἀπὸ τὴν ἀρχαιότητα μέχρι τὴν ἐποχὴν του, ἀλλὰ συνήθειας, ἐκπαίδευσης καὶ διακυβέρνησης. Θὰ προβεῖ ἀκόμη στὸ δοκίμιό του σὲ σχόλια γιὰ χαρακτηριστικὰ λαῶν τῆς ἀρχαιότητος, ὅπως ὁ ἑλληνικὸς, ὁ ρωμαϊκός, ὁ κινεζικὸς, ὁ ἑβραϊκός, ὁρισμένες φορὲς συγκριτικὰ πρὸς ἄλλους λαούς, ὅπως ὁ τουρκικὸς, ὁ ἰσπανικὸς, ὁ ἰσλανδικός, καὶ θὰ ἐπισημάνει γενικότερα ὅτι οἱ λόγοι ποὺ δίδονται γιὰ τοὺς ἐθνικοὺς χαρακτήρες ἐξηγοῦνται ἄλλοτε μὲ ἠθικὲς καὶ ἄλλοτε μὲ φυσικὲς αἰτίες. Ἀπὸ





τις πολλές παρατηρήσεις που κάνει για λαούς της αρχαιότητας αλλά και της σύγχρονης του πραγματικότητας, θα επικεντρώσω στη μελέτη αυτή το ενδιαφέρον μου σέ όσα αναφέρει για τους Έλληνες και κυρίως για τους Νεοέλληνες, απόψεις που βασίζονταν στις προκατειλημμένες αντιλήψεις ευρωπαίων λογίων και περιηγητών της εποχής παρὰ στη δική του εμπειρία, για λαούς του Νότου, μεταξύ των οποίων και οί Νεοέλληνες, που μοιάζουν με σύγχρονες προκατειλημμένες αντιλήψεις που διατυπώνονται γι' αυτούς από τους λαούς του Βορρά στην εποχή μας λόγω της κρίσης του καπιταλισμού. Ο Hume αξιολογεί τους αρχαίους Έλληνες, χαρακτηρίζει αρνητικά τους Νεοέλληνες και επαινεί τους Τούρκους για αρετές που διαθέτουν, τονίζοντας πώς οί ήθικες αίτιες διαμορφώνουν το ήθικò ἐγώ και όχι τὰ φυσικά αἴτια.

Ἀθανασία ΓΛΥΚΟΦΡΥΔΗ-ΛΕΟΝΤΣΙΝΗ

ΑΚΑΔΗΜΙΑ



ΑΘΗΝΩΝ

