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## Linnaeus and the Four Corners of the World

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Many accounts of the history of the race concept place the naturalist Carl Linnaeus (1707–78), and his *Systema Naturae* (1735), at the beginning of modern concepts of race, in contrast to older notions that did not yet reduce race to physical traits, but presented it as the outcome of an inextricable entanglement of blood, soil, and customs.<sup>1</sup> In the slim, 11-page folio *Systema Naturae* (1735) that laid the foundations for the 22-year-old Swedish medical student's future claim to fame, “man (*Homo*)” was presented as part of the animal kingdom in a two-page tabular arrangement of classes, orders, and genera (Figure 9.1). Placing humans among the class of four-footed animals (*Quadrupedia*)—animals possessing a hairy body (*corpus hirsutum*), four feet (*pedes quatuor*), as well as viviparous and breastfeeding females (*feminae viviparae, lactiferae*)—and, within that class, among the order of the “human-shaped” (*Anthropomorpha*)—alongside the apes (*Simia*), and the sloth (*Bradypus*)—Linnaeus cleverly defined the genus *Homo* not by some presumably universal morphological or physiological feature, but by the human capacity for self-knowledge. What is interesting about this definition is that it addresses the reader by citing the famous dictum “Know thyself” (*Nosce te ipsum*), and then proceeds to split up the genus *Homo* into four distinct groups: the white European, the red American, the tawny Asian, and the black African.<sup>2</sup> In a single stroke, Linnaeus thus produced a universal scheme of naturalized human difference while at the same time highlighting that such a classification is the supreme product of human self-reflection. “Know thyself,” Linnaeus suggests by typographic alignment, translates into “Distinguish thyself,” and “race”—if that is what he was talking about here, a question, as we will see, that is not so easy to decide—hence turns out to have been conceived from its very

C A R O L			
I. QUADRUPEDIA.			
<i>Corpus hirsutum. Pedes quatuor. Femina viviparæ, lactiferæ.</i>			
ANTHROPO- MORPHA. <i>Dentes primores 2. u- trinque; vel nulli.</i>	Homo.	Noſce te ipſum.	H { <i>Europæus albeſc. Americanus rubefe. Aſiaticus fufcus. Africanus nigr.</i>
	Simia.	ANTERIORES. POSTERIORES. <i>Digiti 5. . . . . 5. Poſteriores anterioribus ſimiles.</i>	<i>Simia cauda carens. Papio. Satyrus. Cercopithecus. Cynocephalus.</i>
	Bradypus.	<i>Digiti 3. vel 2. . . 3.</i>	<i>At. Ignavus. Tardigradus.</i>

Figure 9.1 “Man’s” place in the system of nature. Detail from Carl Linnaeus, *Systema Naturæ, ſive Regna Triâ Naturæ Systematicè Propoſita per Classes, Ordines, Genera, & Species* (Leiden: Theodor Haak, 1735)

beginning as a Janus-faced concept, facing nature on the one hand, and facing culture as reflection on nature on the other.

Despite its significance for the history of anthropology, there only exists one detailed and systematic study of Linnaeus’s original writings on human races, published in Swedish in 1975 by Gunnar Broberg as part of a book on Linnaeus’s general philosophy of nature and anthropological outlook.<sup>3</sup> As far as I know, Broberg’s exhaustive and careful analysis of the original sources (including manuscripts) has had no reception in the Anglophone literature on the history of the race concept, which therefore continues to be riddled by the widespread misconception that Linnaeus was a staunch essentialist, and presented human races as distinct types. In fact, as we will see, Linnaeus shared contemporary views that skin-color—the chief criterion of distinction employed in the *Systema Naturæ*—was largely a product of climate, and hence as variable as other “accidental” bodily characteristics of humans, such as stature or weight.

The significance that Linnaeus’s classification of four human “varieties” (as he himself called them) would gain can therefore not be reduced to the fact that it pre-empted the racial typologies of the nineteenth century. Something else must have attracted Linnaeus himself, and eventually his readers—among them enlightenment luminaries such as Georges Buffon and Immanuel Kant—to the seductively simple scheme of four races