Hume Studies
Volume 39, Number 1, 2013, pp. 103–121

A Cruel but Ancient Subjugation? Understanding Hume's Attack on Slavery

MARGARET WATKINS

Abstract: This essay argues that Hume's criticism of slavery in "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations," despite its contribution to the British Enlightenment's anti-slavery movement, is not truly abolitionist in character. Hume's aim was not to put an end to contemporary slave practices or forestall their expansion. Nonetheless, the criticism of slavery proves significant for reasons that transcend the demographic questions of the essay. It supports an argument that Hume develops throughout the *Essays* and *Political Discourses*. The conclusion of this argument warns against reverence for either ancient systems or modern progress. Like all forms of factionalism, these divisive tendencies threaten to compromise both our moral sensibility and our rational judgment.

Introduction

> The inhuman sports exhibited at Rome, may justly be considered too as an effect of the people's contempt for slaves, and was also a great cause of the general inhumanity of their princes and rulers. Who can read the accounts of the ampitheatrical entertainments without horror? Or who is surprised, that the emperors should treat that people in the same way the people treated their inferiors? One's humanity is apt to renew the barbarous wish of Caligula, that the people had but one neck: A man

Margaret Watkins, Department of Philosophy, Saint Vincent College, 300 Fraser Purchase Road, Latrobe, PA 15650, U.S.A. E-mail: margaret.watkins@stvincent.edu.

> could almost be pleased, by a single blow, to put an end to such a race of monsters. (Hume, "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations")[1]

No one accustomed to Hume's calm voice in the *Essays*—a voice that seems crafted to calm the passions of a people all too prone to barbarous wishes—could fail to be struck with the venom he expresses in this footnote within "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations."[2] An uncharacteristic forcefulness marks the whole of Hume's discussion of slavery. It is clear that he believes the practice to be irredeemably bad for both enslaver and enslaved and unjustified for any advanced or even civilized society. We can, therefore, understand this essay, first published in the 1752 edition of the *Political Discourses*, as a relatively early contribution to the British Enlightenment's anti-slavery movement.[3]

It is not equally clear, however, that the essay is an abolitionist text. In discussing slavery as an ancient practice and in sanguinely referring to "the remains which are found of domestic slavery" in the colonies and other parts of Europe as something that "would never surely create a desire of rendering it more universal," Hume seems optimistic about the decline and eventual extinction of this inhumane institution (*Essays*, 383). Such optimism may strike us as incredibly naïve, given that he was writing during the massive expansion of European enslavement that continued throughout the later eighteenth century. Moreover, it may leave us wondering how to make sense of the vituperation with which he speaks of the allegedly dying institution.

My aim here is to come to some understanding of these incongruities in Hume's discussion of slavery.[4] Such understanding is important for two reasons in addition to the need for better comprehension of "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations" itself, which has not received the scholarly attention that it deserves. By better understanding this particular essay, we gain a sense of one of Hume's primary goals for the *Essays* in general. And by better understanding Hume's contribution to anti-slavery debates, we gain an improved sense of his role as an Enlightenment thinker, however complex that role may be.

I begin by explaining the context of the slavery discussion within "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations" and argue that, despite some evidence to the contrary, it is fair to interpret Hume as overly sanguine about the future extinction or reduction of slavery. I then consider possible explanations for this sanguinity, arguing that the common appeal to the belief in slavery's economic unsustainability does not sufficiently account for Hume's position. Instead, we must understand his remarks within the context of widespread and long-standing self-deception and obfuscation about slavery in Western Europe. Finally, I argue that Hume's discussion of slavery, while not properly understood as having abolitionist aims, nonetheless reaches beyond the demographic questions of the essay and develops an important theme that runs throughout the *Essays* and *Political*

Discourses. Reflecting on the evils of slavery, Hume cautions his readers against both nostalgia for ancient societies and reverence for modern progress. Like all forms of factionalism, these divisive tendencies threaten to compromise both our moral sensibility and our rational judgment.

1. Hume's Criticism and the Possibility of Slavery's Resurgence

"Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations" was a ground-breaking work of demography and is unique among Hume's *Essays*. It is by far the longest, running about eighty-seven pages in the Liberty Fund edition, while the next longest, "Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences," is only about twenty-six pages. His primary target is the supposition that ancient nations were more populous than modern ones—a claim defended by at least one author, Montesquieu, whom Hume held in great respect.[5] Hume addresses slavery as first among the "domestic" (as opposed to political) differences between the ancient and modern world, and his description of the difference first reveals his sanguine view of progress in this domain: "The chief difference between the *domestic* œconomy of the ancients and that of the moderns consists in the practice of slavery, which prevailed among the former, and which has been abolished for some centuries throughout the greater part of Europe" (*Essays*, 383). On the face of things, the point of the discussion of slavery is to show that its widespread practice tends to decrease rather than increase population, thus providing some evidence against claims of superior density of population in ancient nations.

Almost immediately, however, the discussion seems to outrun this narrow aim. In his studies of other practices in this essay, Hume usually refrains from direct condemnation of ancient habits. Not here. Instead, he repeatedly emphasizes the cruelty and deleterious effects of slavery, far beyond its effects on population. Domestic slavery, he insists, is "more cruel and oppressive than any civil subjection whatsoever" (*Essays*, 383). This form of cruelty is the special skill of the petty tyrant—likely to be far more oppressive than a great but distant despot.[6] Hume argues that a great monarch, distant in both space and consequence from her subjects, cannot possibly concern herself with the everyday acts of each of them. She is therefore less likely to impose severe restrictions on such acts—or enforce them effectively if she attempts to. The distance also reduces the psychological burden on the subject, making "fainter that cruel comparison . . . between our own subjection, and the freedom, and even dominion of another" (*Essays*, 383). He also notes that the practice of slavery engenders vicious habits in those with power, who suffer the distorting effects of having complete control over other human beings. The resulting perversion damages both oppressor and oppressed:

> The little humanity, commonly observed in persons, accustomed, from their infancy, to exercise so great authority over their fellow-creatures, and to trample upon human nature, were sufficient alone to disgust us with that unbounded dominion. Nor can a more probable reason be assigned for the severe, I might say, barbarous manners of ancient times, than the practice of domestic slavery; by which every man of rank was rendered a petty tyrant, and educated amidst the flattery, submission, and low debasement of his slaves. (*Essays*, 383–84)

Not satisfied with these general remarks, Hume gives detailed examples of the cruelty exercised against ancient slaves, including exposure and starvation of those made useless by age or infirmity, chaining during all varieties of work, enduring torture as witnesses, and regular beatings as "due correction and discipline" (*Essays*, 386). His ire culminates in the footnote quoted above, in which he gives vent to the desire to return barbarism for barbarism.

In these passages, Hume tells his readers directly and precisely what he thinks of the ownership of other human beings. In doing so, he diverges from the explicit intent and method of the rest of the essay, as he notes at the end of these opening passages: "But our present business is only to consider the influence of slavery on the populousness of a state" (*Essays*, 386). From this point forward, he moves to subtler, more intricate forms of reasoning to show that slavery oppresses population growth, not just the human spirit.

The opposing case, alleging the benefits of slavery on population, relies on the notion that human slave owners, like good shepherds, would carefully breed and rear new generations of slaves, thus increasing the general stock of human beings as well as their own wealth. Hume's reply meets this reasoning on its own terms, though he notes that the "comparison is shocking between the management of human creatures and that of cattle" (*Essays*, 387). However shocking, it is in this case, "extremely just," Hume says wryly. Yet if we must approach questions of human subjugation from an economic perspective, he insists that we be more careful economists. Just as in urban centers it is cheaper to bring in livestock from outlying areas than to rear them with expensive city resources, it would be cheaper to bring in human resources from the provinces than to cultivate and rear them within a city household. Hume provides numerous confirmatory sources to support this speculation. To give just a few examples, he notes that Aristotle's *Politics* implies that slaves are foreigners; he refers to the listing of Demosthenes's inheritance and notes that only male slaves were mentioned, without reference to women, children, or family of any kind; and in a striking instance of linguistic analysis, he argues that the presence in Latin of a term (*verna*) for a slave who had been reared within a family, with no correlative designating the opposite, suggests that such slaves were in the minority (*Essays*, 389n21).

Hume assumes, along with his interlocutors, that high population correlates with general well-being. After making some allowance at the beginning of the essay for the influence of fertile soils and climates, he concludes, "But if every thing else be equal, it seems natural to expect, that, wherever there are most happiness and virtue, and the wisest institutions, there will also be most people" (*Essays*, 382). (It is important to remember that Hume is writing almost a half-century before Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population*, so it is not surprising that he does not countenance the possible dangers of increasing population.) Therefore, these arguments that slavery decreases the population provide indirect criticism of the institution of slavery itself.

Hume feels so strongly, however, about slavery that he actually refuses to admit that its promoting population *would* be evidence that its practitioners lived a superior form of life. In a footnote, he observes that

> if domestic slavery really encreased populousness, it would be an exception to the general rule, that the happiness of any society and its populousness are necessary attendants. A master, from humour or interest, may make his slaves very unhappy, yet be careful, from interest, to encrease their number. Their marriage is not a matter of choice with them, more than any other action of their life. (*Essays*, 387n17)

Moreover, even in this part of the essay, his detailed discussion provides another kind of indirect criticism of slavery. The argument that slavery decreases rather than increases population refers repeatedly to particular examples of inhumanity, usually without moral comment. It relies throughout on the inhumane metaphor between cattle and slaves, thus reminding the reader that the practice requires treating one's fellow human beings as livestock. It paints in vivid colors instances of violence against slaves, such as the story of the Roman nobleman whose 400 slaves were summarily executed in response to his assassination by only one of them (*Essays*, 393). And it shows slaves living either in forced celibacy or paying dearly for the privilege of sexual relations that would have been assumed as rights for the rest of the population (*Essays*, 391–94).

The nature and complexity of these various salvos against the institution of slavery seem to serve a purpose beyond demographic analysis. One wonders, therefore, if Hume is not actually as optimistic about slavery's decline as he appears. Perhaps his polemics against slavery aim not only to argue against a mistaken view of the size of the population of slave-holding societies in the ancient world but also to warn against present and future resurgence of the practice. Indeed, he seems to express some anxiety about such resurgence during his initial presentation of the issue:

> Some passionate admirers of the ancients, and zealous partisans of civil liberty, (for these sentiments, as they are, both of them, in the main, extremely just, are found to be almost inseparable) cannot forbear regretting the loss of this institution; and whilst they brand all submission to the government of a single person with the harsh denomination of slavery, they would gladly reduce the greater part of mankind to real slavery and subjection. (*Essays*, 383)

Hume does not identify these "passionate admirers of the ancients," but one plausible candidate is Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun, who was indeed both a fierce defender of liberty and an advocate for a return to the practice of ancient slavery (though he objected to the use of the term "slavery"). In the first of his *Two Discourses Concerning the Affairs of Scotland*, he argues with force and eloquence for Scotland's need to protect itself against the encroaching power of the British sovereign. "For a government is not only a tyranny, when tyrannically exercised," he notes, "but also when there is no sufficient caution in the constitution that it may not be exercised tyrannically."[7] Yet in the second discourse, he proceeds to propose a system of forced servitude as the only effective response to Scotland's widespread hunger and famine.

Fletcher explicitly models the proposal on ancient slave practices, saying that after finding no modern governments effectively dealing with poverty, he "began to consider what might be the conduct of the wise antients in that affair" (*Political Works*, 58). And his admiration for the ancient system seems unbounded. He credits it with enabling magnificent works of infrastructure and art, which are all the more impressive given that these projects were completed amongst "so much virtue and simplicity of manners," during a time in which women were not so "intolerably expensive" (65).[8] The slaves themselves, moreover, were models of usefulness and faithfulness. Truly this was an idyllic time, when "any master who had the least judgment or discretion, was served with emulation by all his slaves" (66). Of course, the contemporary lack of such virtues presents a problem for Fletcher, which he recognizes by insisting that his proposals,

> when once resolved, must be executed with great address, diligence, and severity; for that sort of people is so desperately wicked, such enemies of work and labour, and, which is yet more amazing, so proud, in esteeming their own condition above that which they will be sure to call slavery; that unless prevented by the utmost industry and diligence, upon the first publication of any orders necessary for putting in execution such a design, they will rather die with hunger in caves and dens, and murder their young children, than appear abroad to have them and themselves taken into such a kind of service. (Fletcher, *Political Works*, 69)

We know that Hume was familiar with Fletcher; he mentions him in the *History of England* as "a man of signal probity and fine genius," with strong "republican principles," yet much subject to passions with occasionally violent effects.[9] His *Political Works* were probably in Hume's library,[10] and Neil McArthur notes that Hume enjoyed the patronage of Fletcher's influential nephew, Lord Milton, "who idolized his uncle."[11] Furthermore, there are some parallels between Fletcher's *Discourses* and Hume's *Essays*. Fletcher's opposition to the use of men for a standing army who might instead be employed in trade and manufacturing provides a particular context for Hume's discussion of the potential tension between public and private good in "Of Commerce." And anyone surprised by Hume's description of the character of soldiers in "Of National Characters" will find a similar, if somewhat harsher, description in Fletcher's first *Discourse* (Fletcher, *Political Works*, 46). Therefore, the proposal that Hume had Fletcher's ideas in mind, and thus considered the re-emergence of slavery a real threat, is not implausible.

Again, it may seem incredible to imagine that Hume was *not* concerned about such a threat. People advancing the acceptability of slavery were hardly rare at the time. Just to cite one instance, in 1751, only one year before the publication of "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations," the jurist Andrew McDouall wrote in *An Institute of the Laws of Scotland in Civil Rights*, "Slavery was introduced by the law and customs of nations. It is indeed contrary to the state of nature, by which all men were equal and free; but is not repugnant to the law of nature, which does not command men to live in their native freedom, nor forbid the preserving persons, at the expense of their liberty, whom it was lawful to kill."[12] The presence of such arguments suggests that genuine concern about sympathy among his readership for a return to the ancient practice may have motivated Hume's vehement attack in "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations."

Serious textual obstacles, however, stand in the way of accepting this interpretation. Hume's remark about colonial practice seems to combine blithe naïveté about the viability of slavery in America with acknowledgment of its continued cruelty and inhumanity. Recall that Hume claims that the "remains which are found of domestic slavery, in the American colonies, and among some European nations, *would never surely create a desire of rendering it more universal*" (*Essays*, 383; my italics). American slavery would sadly prove to be more than the "remains" of a dying institution, and its proponents were all too nimble at providing arguments for its continuation and expansion. Regrettably, Hume provided a basis for some of these arguments himself, with his racist remarks in an infamous footnote to "Of National Characters" (*Essays*, 208).[13] But his tone in this section of "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations" does not suggest any genuine concern that the practice of domestic slavery will encroach upon the established system of paid domestic servants in northwestern Europe. Hume seems assured that such a practice has really "been abolished for some centuries throughout the greater part

of Europe." In other essays, he expresses strong anxiety over developing modern practices, such as increased public debt. There is no such essay on the growth of slavery. Given the strength of his opposition to slavery, the omission of such an essay is particularly striking. He speaks of slavery in the colonies as outside the purview of his concerns in the *Essays*, and the footnote in "Of National Characters" suggests that he may well have failed to appreciate the racial dimension of colonial slavery's injustice.[14] Although Fletcher does seem a plausible target for Hume's remark about "passionate admirers of the ancients," Fletcher's proposal, advanced in 1698, was an old one by the time Hume writes this essay and had largely fallen on deaf ears. In an editorial note to Andrew Fletcher's *Political Works*, John Robertson remarks that "Fletcher's draconian solutions to the problems of poverty and vagrancy were not taken too seriously by contemporaries, and secured nothing like the support he received for his proposals for constitutional change five years later. What he advocated did, as he pointed out, build on the coercive aspects of earlier Scottish legislation for poor relief, but the tendency of subsequent discussion was against anything which smacked of a return to slavery" (70–71n).

2. Was it the Economy? Western European Slavery Denial

How is Hume's apparent lack of concern about slavery in his own day possible? Great Britain and other European countries were in the process of vastly extending the practice of slavery in their own colonies. During the eighteenth century, the average number of Africans sent to the Americas for enslavement increased from 30,000 per year to 75,000 per year.[15] One popular explanation for this kind of nonchalance holds that the dominant view in Hume's time (prior to the 1793 invention of the cotton gin) was that slavery was not economically viable over the long term and would die a natural death. There is reason, however, to question the alleged dominance of that view.

Great Britain clearly adopted a progressive stance against slavery in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The landmark Somerset case, decided in 1772, decisively undermined slave-owners' rights to legal domination over their slaves in England and quickly extended its reach throughout the United Kingdom (Drescher, 99–103). And in 1807, the British parliament became an international leader in the movement to abolish the African slave trade by passing the Slave Trade Abolition Act. Many historians, influenced by Eric Williams's 1944 *Capitalism and Slavery*, have argued for the primacy of economic motives for abolition. As David Richardson puts it in a historiographical review, "Williams reduced the rise and outcome of antislavery in Britain to a political calculus of national economic self-interest," thus "relegating those who fought against slavery, whether from inside or outside the system, to the role of bystanders in a drama primarily dictated by impersonal economic forces."[16]

Recent work, however, has challenged Williams's view, without attempting to revert to complacent celebration of the moral nobility of everyone involved in the abolitionist movement. Christopher Leslie Brown and Iain Whyte, for example, insist on the importance of social movements and moral ideals to English and Scottish abolitionism.[17] And perhaps most influentially, Seymour Drescher has argued that abolition was, in fact, profoundly contrary to Great Britain's economic interest, although economic forces were certainly an explicit part of the debates over abolition.[18] This last point is particularly telling. If people were so convinced that slavery was economically detrimental, then no one would have needed to press the point in public debate.

In fact, however, we find a number of philosophers and politicians making such arguments, including Hume's friend, Adam Smith. In his *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, Smith argues that slave labor is far less productive for masters than paid labor, because slaves have no motive to produce anything above what is absolutely required for their own survival. Moreover, the resulting concentration of wealth in a few hands, with limited natural mechanisms for that wealth to generate economic activity among a poorer class barred from holding property, "renders rich and wealthy men of large properties of great and real detriment, which otherwise are rather of service as they promote trade and commerce."[19] Slavery is obviously bad for the economic prospects of the slave; Smith insists that it also harms the master and the economic community as a whole. Seeds of this kind of argument appear in Hume. In a footnote in "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations," Hume notes that, "from the experience of our planters, slavery is as little advantageous to the master as to the slave, wherever hired servants can be procured," and he goes on to say that "the fear of punishment will never draw so much labour from a slave, as the dread of being turned off and not getting another service, will from a freeman" (*Essays*, 390n23). He does not infer from this that slavery will die in the colonies, however, perhaps because he did not believe that sufficient numbers of hired servants were procurable in this part of the world. The *Lectures on Jurisprudence* were given from 1762–1763; therefore, the assumption that the question of slavery's economic viability was already considered settled ten years previously seems highly questionable.

Despite his belief in the economic disadvantages of slavery, Smith is not himself optimistic about the prospects of widespread abolition. He notes that in democratic societies, the people who themselves make the laws will be unlikely to act in their own "real interest," because of the strong "love of domination and authority and the pleasure men take in having every <thing> done by their express orders" (*Lectures on Jurisprudence*, 186). Monarchs might be more willing than people in democratic societies to liberate slaves, but they will be held back by fear of the rebellion of their wealthiest and most powerful subjects. Smith concludes that "it is not likely that slavery should be ever abolished, and it was owing to some

peculiar circumstances that it has been abolished in the small corner of the world in which it now is" (*Lectures on Jurisprudence*, 186).[20] Again, it is difficult in the face of such evidence to accept that the prospects for slavery were closed by economic arguments in the minds of Hume and his contemporaries.

Hume could hardly have been ignorant of the growing economic importance of slavery in the colonies, especially given the criticism of the practice by those, like Montesquieu, with whom he was in correspondence.[21] But in his *Essays*, Hume is addressing the "small corner of the world" that had decisively chosen paid servant labor over enslavement of their fellow human beings—at least within their own borders—and took pride in that choice. It is fair to say that this pride was, for many northwestern Europeans, neither without hypocrisy nor well grounded in the facts. Obviously, many British citizens were earning income on the backs of slave labor, either as owners of plantations in the New World or as participants in the many industries bound up with slavery's fruits. Moreover, as Drescher documents in *Abolition*, the story of Renaissance and early modern European abolition is convoluted at best. To come to terms with Hume's attitude towards the prospects of slavery in Europe, we must briefly consider this history.

The sense that slavery was a barbaric practice incompatible with Christianity or the advanced civilizations of Europe developed alongside ever more sophisticated methods of justifying or ignoring complicity in that same practice. When it had been established that Christians must not enslave fellow Christians, the Protestant Revolution opened the door to declaring a large population of ostensible Christians "beyond the pale of Christian liberty" on account of their heresy (*Abolition*, 13). France adopted a stunningly progressive principle of freedom, insisting that anyone who had touched French soil was free, so that the Guyenne Parlement was able to declare, as early as 1571, that "France, the mother of liberty, doesn't permit any slaves."[22] Yet, confronted by the need for a huge stock of labor to power galley ships, the French navy discovered that this principle did not apply to slaves purchased in Muslim countries with established slave commerce (*Abolition*, 66). Generations of European civil law jurists, like McDouall, reiterated the permissibility of slavery in general. But, as Drescher notes,

> These same civil law jurists living in the zone of Europe without slave law might casually, and even proudly, refer to the development of mutual non-enslavement between European combatants. For these scholars, slavery was hardly a problem in their culture. In retrospect, nothing is as striking in their works as their general indifference to the implications of the emerging transatlantic institution on their writings. (*Abolition*, 64)

In his complacency about the threat of expanding slavery, then, Hume inherits a sensibility established by centuries of Europeans, particularly in northwestern

Europe, and rests assured that most of his audience will do the same. To note the history of such complacency, of course, is not to defend it. Hume, as a historian and a philosopher who prided himself on seeing behind the pretensions of institutions like the priesthood, would have been as capable as anyone of unmasking this particular hypocrisy. The passion and strength of his arguments against the cruelty of slavery, however, mitigate against this judgment somewhat. And that passion and strength still leaves us with a puzzle about "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations."

3. Anti-Slavery as Anti-Factionalism about the Past versus the Present

If we cannot interpret Hume's arguments against slavery as truly abolitionist, because they reflect little concern about the resurgence of slavery, it may be tempting to return to the hypothesis that these arguments serve a merely demographic purpose: to show that ancient nations could not have been as populous as some thought. But, as I have argued above, this hypothesis cannot explain the virulence of Hume's critique or his detailing disadvantages of slavery that have nothing to do with population growth or decline.

These aspects of Hume's discussion in "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations" make perfect sense if his target is not a political pro-slavery movement but, instead, a tendency to romanticize an earlier way of life. He tells us at the beginning of the essay that the population question is important, in part, because its answer informs people's judgment of whole "ages or kingdoms" (*Essays*, 381). Given the assumption that most people will reproduce whenever they are able, "every wise, just, and mild government, by rendering the condition of its subjects easy and secure, will always abound most in people, as well as in commodities and riches" (*Essays*, 382). Hume concludes with the claim, quoted above, that if "every thing else be equal, it seems natural to expect, that wherever there are most happiness and virtue, and the wisest institutions, there will also be most people" (*Essays*, 382).

At stake, then, are our judgments of other ages' "whole police, their manners, and the constitution of their government" (*Essays*, 381). In other words, if ancient nations were more populous, they must also have been superior in the most essential aspects of life. From this perspective, establishing that slavery oppresses population growth would be sufficient to repel such inferences. Interestingly, Hume does not leave the argument there: he instead goes on to argue that the institution of slavery itself had a corrupting effect on the habits of ancient peoples; in fact, we can always expect that, all else being equal, an enslaving culture's vices will feed on themselves, producing inhumanity as well as arising from it.

What I am suggesting is that alongside of his arguments that tend towards the stated aim of the essay, Hume weaves another line of argumentation, in which he warns his readers that social practices and institutions have serious consequences for the formation of human character. The target of this argument would be those who claimed superiority for ancient virtues that were allegedly lost or diminished in modern times. By focusing only on the ancients' concern with nobility, scorn of danger in battle, elevation of heroism, and fierce dedication to civic liberty, one can enter the imaginative space of a "passionate admirer of the ancients."

Later pro-slavery advocates carried this admiration and its implications for enslavement to new heights. Thomas Roderick Dew, for instance, in his influential *Review of the Debate in the Virginia Legislature of 1831 and 1832*, celebrates slavery's generation of a spirit of liberty and equality in the American South by analogy to ancient republics:

> *It has been contended that slavery is unfavorable to a republican spirit:* but the whole history of the world proves that this is far from being the case. In the ancient republics of Greece and Rome, where the spirit of liberty glowed with most intensity, the slaves were more numerous than the freemen. Aristotle, and the great men of antiquity, believed slavery necessary to keep alive the spirit of freedom. In Sparta, the freeman was even forbidden to perform the offices of slaves, lest he might lose the spirit of independence. In modern times, too, liberty has always been more ardently desired by slave holding communities. "Such," says Burke, "were our Gothic ancestors; such in our days, were the Poles; and such will be all masters of slaves who are not slaves themselves."—"These people of the southern (American) colonies are much more strongly, and with a higher and more stubborn spirit, attached to liberty, than those of the northward."[23] And from the time of Burke down to the present day, the southern states have always borne this same honorable distinction. (Dew, 112)

According to Dew, the ancient republics "glowed" with the spirit of liberty and independence, with "great men" stoking the embers. And by following their example, Southern freemen can share in their honor. Dew was by no means the only, or even the most influential, Southern writer to connect republicanism, slavery, and the model of the ancients. It was a common trope as the South moved to an explicit proslavery position in the nineteenth century. In his study of the ideology of the proslavery movement, Larry Tise notes that William Harper, chancellor of South Carolina throughout the middle decades of the century, claimed that there were "important lessons to be gained from Burke and the examples of the ancient republics: 'They teach us that slavery is compatible with freedom, stability, and

long duration of civil government, with denseness of population, great power, and the highest civilization.'" [24]

This is romanticizing the past, indeed! Dew extends this sensibility to a corresponding mythology of the Southern ethos, almost shocking in its absurdity. He extols the fraternal spirit among Southern whites of all stations, who all allegedly feel themselves to be on a "common level," at least "as nearly as can be expected or even desired in this world" (Dew, 112). "Color alone," he says, "is here the badge of distinction, the true mark of aristocracy," and in such a setting, the nasty effects of class warfare melt away (Dew, 113). Notice that this fantasy rests on the claim that practices and circumstances shape human nature. With such a claim, Hume cannot quibble: it is his own. But he would protest its application. Without contesting the claim that slavery generates a class of freemen fiercely dedicated to liberty, he insists that it has darker, more significant effects on human character as well.

The notion that slavery's primary effects include a salutary leveling of difference and increased community spirit requires blinding oneself to the suffering of a large part of the community. But if Hume is right, this kind of blinding is precisely what we ought to expect from this institution. To us, it is obvious that slavery stems from inhumanity: proposing to buy and sell one's fellow human beings reveals a deeply inhumane acceptance of the idea that the people regarded as chattel are sub-human. It is also obvious that the institution *produces* inhumanity, insofar as the cruelty exercised against the enslaved only begins with their acquisition: as Hume takes pains to document, the suffering inflicted on slaves goes far beyond being forced to work without any hope of remuneration or autonomy. Hume takes the argument a step farther: for the slaveholders themselves, slavery does not leave everything as it is. We find that human nature is not static: slavery teaches the privileged class the joys of domineering over other creatures, hardens them against the suffering of other persons, and in general, produces "barbarous manners" (*Essays*, 384).

As slavery encourages masters to think of slaves as chattel or brutes rather than fellow human beings, the force of natural sympathy between humans is broken. The master may see the slave suffering, but sympathy with that suffering is not as encouraged by the "great resemblance among all human creatures" as it would be in relations between other people (T 2.1.11.5; SBN 318).[25] Thus, the causes of slaves' suffering—their poverty, their lack of education, their very subjugation itself—are more likely to produce contempt, or even hatred, than pity or love. To make things worse, the masters' intimate role in *creating* the suffering of the slave will likely intensify the negative passions. As Hume observes in the *Treatise*, "the injuries we do, not only cause hatred in the person, who suffers them, but even in ourselves" (T 2.2.9.10; SBN 384). The prolonged contact that masters have with their slaves, therefore, may not reinforce the masters' sympathetic identification

with this portion of humanity; it may instead reinforce the masters' hatred of and cruelty towards those who serve him. Such abuse feeds on itself.

The practice of widespread domestic slavery, then, may change those who enslave into people more cruel and less prone to some operations of sympathy than they otherwise would be. If institutions like slavery have such effects on human beings, admiration of the allegedly good aspects of ancient (or foreign) modes of life must be tempered by the acknowledgement that one cannot transfer elements of that life to other contexts and expect them to have the same consequences that they had elsewhere. One cannot even trust one's own assessment of what those effects might have been on ancient peoples, given that we will always fail in some ways to understand the particulars of their situations. Some degree of skepticism may be the reasonable response to any claim that those in former times led superior lives.

What, then, can we conclude about Hume's attack on slavery in "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations"? It seems clear that his aim is not merely historical: he is not merely interested in proving that we ought to be skeptical of claims about ancient cultures that lack sufficient evidence. Instead, his aim is practical as well, though it does depend on a correction of a kind of unreasonableness. Nostalgia for or even superstition about the past seems to be among those features of human nature that, Hume thinks, require careful and repeated correction. The tendency to elevate the past is dangerous, not simply because it distorts our judgment, but also because it carries with it the potential of a self-fulfilling prophesy. Nostalgia tends to resist change and progress. It can be associated with the tendency that Nietzsche so powerfully identifies as the propensity to "let the dead bury the living."[26] But Hume's position is more subtle and interesting than straightforward progressivism. In many places in both the *Essays* and in other works, Hume demonstrates profound and diverse admiration for ancient writers, statesmen, and philosophers. The essay "Of Eloquence," for instance, takes as its guiding question: why have moderns failed to achieve the heights of eloquence so clearly attained in both ancient Greece and Rome? In the second *Enquiry*, Hume claims that the ancient moralists are the "best models," and in the appended dialogue, a character who certainly seems to be speaking in Hume's voice asserts that in ethics the moderns fail utterly to surpass the ancients. The sheer number of ancient authors and texts to whom Hume appeals throughout his writing evince his appreciation and admiration for them.[27]

We certainly cannot read Hume as a proto-Hegelian, convinced of the inevitability of progress. To do so would be to ignore his suspicion of any such providential reading of history, not to mention the concern about specific kinds of decline that he expresses in his economic and political essays. The essay "Of Public Credit" begins with a comparison between the ancient practice of saving for war during times of peace and the less prudent modern "expedient," which is

"to mortgage the public revenues, and to trust that posterity will pay off the incumbrances contracted by their ancestors" (*Essays*, 350). It ends with descriptions of two possible consequences of continuing with current policy, both destructive: "[i]t must, indeed, be one of these two events; either the nation must destroy public credit, or public credit will destroy the nation" (*Essays*, 360–61). Even in the relatively optimistic "Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences," Hume predicts that periods of progress in a nation carry the seeds of their own decline (see *Essays*, 135). And while Hume has no wish to pretend that no real progress has been made, he by no means believes continuation of that progress to be inevitable. Consider this remarkable passage from a letter to Thomas Percy in 1773:

> Why still exalt Old England for a Model of Government and Laws; Praises which it by no means deserves? And why still complain of the present times, which, in every respect, so far surpass all the past? I am only sorry to see, that the great Decline, if we ought not rather to say, the total Extinction of Literature in England, prognosticates a very short Duration of all our other Improvements, and threatens a new and a sudden Inroad of Ignorance, Superstition, and Barbarism.[28]

A more plausible interpretation sees Hume as concerned with *both* wholesale condemnation of the present *and* wholesale condemnation of the past—tendencies that promote factionalism between those of a progressive and those of a conservative bent. The division between those furiously pursuing the preservation of the past, on the one hand, and those desperately striving to overcome the past and leap into the future, on the other, at least in part underlies many of the other factional divisions that concern Hume throughout the *Essays*. These include divisions between Whigs and Tories, Catholics and Protestants, proponents of the divine right of kings and contract theorists, and even Scots and Englishmen.

If this hypothesis is correct, the attack on slavery warns its readers of the distorting tendencies of being partisans on the side of the ancients, and it does so in a way that looks forward to later theories about the changeability of human nature that many associate primarily with the nineteenth century. Hume asks us to consider, when contemplating various institutional and political structures, not only what kind of *life* we would want to lead but also what kind of *people* we would like to be. He presents evidence that ancient peoples tolerated a level of inhumanity that would be foreign to a more civilized temperament as well as evidence that the institution of slavery promotes such toleration. Such evidence cautions us against both the tendency to imagine, despairingly, that we have lost sight of a former, superior mode of existence and the more optimistic desire to import aspects of other modes of life into our own without considering how importing those modes would affect the human beings that we are now. In "Of the Delicacy of Taste and

Passion," Hume, in concert with an ancient Roman poet, recommends practices that humanize character and permit it "not to be cruel" (*Essays*, 6). Ancient slavery, he charges, does precisely the opposite.

Hume's attack on slavery, then, ought not to be read as an abolitionist text, whose aim of retarding the progress of the ongoing slave trade might somehow compensate for his nasty opinions about other races or what strike many as his overly conservative political positions. It should be read, however, as a severe condemnation of slavery in general and a warning against a tendency that, as he makes clear at the end of "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations," is not confined to the modern sensibility. After quoting Diodorus Siculus, a first-century BCE historian, lamenting "the present emptiness and depopulation which is spread over the world," Hume concludes with this observation: "The humour of blaming the present, and admiring the past, is strongly rooted in human nature, and has an influence even on persons endued with the profoundest judgment and most extensive learning" (*Essays*, 464).

NOTES

The editors of *Hume Studies*, two anonymous readers, and Robert Miner provided helpful suggestions on earlier drafts of this essay, for which I am very grateful. I am also indebted to Jacqueline Taylor, whose question for another speaker at the 2012 Hume Society meeting led me to think more deeply about Hume's attitude towards slavery in "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations."

1 In David Hume, *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), 386n, hereafter cited in the text as "*Essays*" followed by page number.

2 John Immerwahr, in "The Anatomist and the Painter: The Continuity of Hume's *Treatise* and *Essays*," *Hume Studies* 27 (1991): 6–7, argues that the *Essays* constitute Hume's practical morality, the goal of which is to promote human well-being through tranquilizing the passions. See also John Immerwahr, "Hume on Tranquillizing the Passions," *Hume Studies* 28 (1992): 293–314.

3 For a fascinating study of the connection between the *Political Discourses* and Hume's "Early Memoranda," that offers an account of how and when Hume composed "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations," see Tatsuya Sakamoto, "Hume's 'Early Memoranda' and the Making of His Political Economy," *Hume Studies* 37 (2011): 131–64.

4 Hume mentions slavery in many of his writings. There are some intriguing passages in Book 2 of the *Treatise* and in the second *Enquiry* as well as numerous references to slavery in the *History of England.* Although a comprehensive study of Hume's views of slavery would need to consider these passages, their examination is beyond my scope here.

5 Hume also mentions Isaak Vossius, whose arguments for the high population of ancient Rome in *Variarum Observationum Liber* Hume dismisses as well-known "extravagancies" (*Essays*, 380), and his fellow Scot, Dr. Robert Wallace, though not by name. See 378–379n2 and variant a, 638–39.

6 Hume echoes this claim throughout the *Essays*. See, for example, "Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences": "Arbitrary power, in all cases, is somewhat oppressive and debasing; but it is altogether ruinous and intolerable, when contracted into a small compass; and becomes still worse, when the person, who possesses it, knows that the time of his authority is limited and uncertain" (*Essays*, 116–17).

7 Andrew Fletcher, *Political Works*, ed. John Robertson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 50. Robertson suggests that Hume may have had Fletcher in mind in these passages (64n), but I am indebted to Roger Emerson for suggesting this possibility to me. Fletcher's *Two Discourses* were written in 1698.

8 Hume also credits the ancients with simplicity of manners. In *Essays*, see "Of Civil Liberty," 89; "Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences," 131; "Of Money," 292; and in "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations" itself, 392 and 394. Hume's praise of this trait, however, is far from unmixed. He comments in the "Rise and Progress" passage that "the ancient simplicity, which is naturally so amiable and affecting, often degenerates into rusticity and abuse, scurrility and obscenity" (*Essays* 131).

9 *The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688*, vol. 6 (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1983), 459.

10 See David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton, *The David Hume Library* (New Castle: Oak Knoll Press, 1996), 91.

11 Neil McArthur, *David Hume's Political Theory: Law, Commerce, and the Constitution of Government* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 163n20.

12 A. McDouall, Lord Bankton, *An Institute of the Laws of Scotland in Civil Rights*, vol. 1 (Fleming for Kincaid and Donaldson, 1751–1753), 77.

13 And, less blamably, with the essay in question itself. See Thomas R. Dew's use of Hume's arguments to argue that proposed legislation would increase the cost of adult slaves, resulting in an increase in the birth rate among African-Americans, a result that he assumes to be undesirable. Thomas R. Dew, *Review of the Debate in the Virginia Legislature of 1831 and 1832* (Richmond, VA: T. W. White, 1832), 53–56.

14 There has been a lively debate about this footnote and what it implies about the nature and extent of Hume's racism. See Richard Popkin, "Hume's Racism," *Philosophical Forum* 9 (1978): 211–26, and "Hume's Racism Reconsidered," in *The Third Force in Seventeenth-Century Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 64–75. Popkin argues that Hume's remarks provided a theoretical basis for some of the worst forms of racism and that there was plenty of counter-evidence to Hume's claims that he should have been aware of. See also John Immerwahr, "Hume's Revised Racism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 53 (1993): 481–86; and Aaron Garrett, "Hume's Revised Racism Revisted," *Hume Studies* 26 (2000): 171–77. For a mitigated defense of Hume, see Robert Palter, "Hume and Prejudice," *Hume Studies* 21 (1995): 3–24. Regardless of how one judges the nature and

degree of Hume's racism, his attack on slavery cannot serve as a much of a defense. The ancient slavery that is the primary target of this attack was not a racially-based system.

15 Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 61.

16 David Richardson, "Agency, Ideology, and Violence in the History of Transatlantic Slavery," *The Historical Journal* 50 (2007): 971–989, 982–83.

17 See Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006) and Iain Whyte, *Scotland and the Abolition of Black Slavery, 1756–1838* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006).

18 See Seymour Drescher, *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010) and Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment: Free Labor Versus Slavery in British Emancipation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

19 Adam Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, ed. R. L. Meek, D. D. Raphael, and P. G. Stein (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982), 198. Smith makes similar arguments in *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner, vol. 1 (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1981). See especially Book III, chapter 2.

20 In the *Wealth of Nations*, Smith argues that "The pride of man makes him love to domineer, and nothing mortifies him so much as to be obliged to condescend to persuade his inferiors. Wherever the law allows it, and the nature of the work can afford it, therefore, he will generally prefer the service of slaves to that of freemen" (*Wealth of Nations*, 388).

21 For a helpful overview of the contribution of Scottish thinkers to the abolitionist movement, see Alison Webster, "The Contribution of the Scottish Enlightenment to the Abandonment of the Institution of Slavery," *The European Legacy* 8 (2003): 481–89.

22 Sue Peabody, *"There are No Slaves in France": The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Régime* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 29.

23 Dew is quoting Edmund Burke's 1775 speech to parliament on conciliation with the American colonies, but in a selective way that obscures Burke's real point. Warning that the Americans were as devoted to their freedom as any warm-blooded Englishman, Burke insists that the Southern colonies had a peculiarly strong source of this devotion: "It is that in Virginia and the Carolinas, they have a vast multitude of slaves. Where this is the case in any part of the world, those who are free, are by far the most proud and jealous of their freedom. Freedom is to them not only an enjoyment, but a kind of rank and privilege. Not seeing there, that freedom, as in countries where it is a common blessing, and as broad and general as the air, may be united with much abject toil, with great misery, with all the exterior of servitude, Liberty looks amongst them, like something that is more noble and liberal. . . . Such were all the ancient commonwealths; such were our Gothick ancestors; such in our days were the Poles; and such will be all masters of slaves, who are not slaves themselves. In such a people the haughtiness of domination combines with the spirit of freedom, fortifies it, and renders it invincible." Edmund Burke, "Speech on Conciliation with America, 22 March 1775," in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, Vol. 3, *Party, Parliament, and the American War 1774–1780*, ed. Paul Langford, W. M. Elofson, with John A. Woods (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996),

122–23. Burke does not intend to suggest that this love of freedom counter-balances the evils of slavery; it is a love rooted in haughty pride and misapprehension of the burdens of freedom. Burke himself advocated the gradual abolition of slavery.

24 Larry E. Tise, *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701–1840* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 343. The quotation is from Harper's "Memoir on Slavery."

25 References to the *Treatise* are to David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), hereafter cited in the text as "T" followed by Book, part, section, and paragraph numbers; and *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), hereafter cited in the text as "SBN" followed by page numbers.

26 Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" in *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 72. Nietzsche's remark comes in his discussion of those who use monuments of past art to destroy any innovation in new artistic endeavors: "Monumental history is the masquerade costume in which their [the inartistic natures'] hatred of the great and powerful of their own age is disguised as satiated admiration for the great and powerful of past ages, and muffled in which they invert the real meaning of that mode of regarding history into its opposite; whether they are aware of it or not, they act as though their motto were: let the dead bury the living."

27 Sakamoto documents Hume's dedicated turn to studying the ancients in preparation for writing "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations." See "Hume's 'Early Memoranda,'" 153–54.

28 David Hume, Letter 110, *New Letters of David Hume*, ed. Raymond Klibansky and Ernest C. Mossner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), 199.