**Margaret Watkins, The Philosophical Progress of Hume’s Essays (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019). Pp. 265. £75 hardback. ISBN: 9781108476270.**

Philosophers have not fully understood David Hume because they have looked almost exclusively at his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40) and his two *Enquires* (1748 and 1751). This is what the philosopher Margaret Watkins argues in her book in which she zooms in on Hume’s *Essays*, written and collected at various times during his life. Most of these essays have been read mainly by historians and political theorists. Watkins contends that philosophers need to pay attention to the *Essays* to properly comprehend Hume. Here she builds on James Harris’s arguments that Hume never abandoned philosophy – in the broader and more literary sense in which he and other eighteenth-century “natives” understood the word – just after the *Treatise* because he wrote in genres which to us do not look much like philosophy*.* Although Watkins implies some disagreement with Harris (3), I think they share a degree of common ground on this score, even if Watkins is much more attracted to the notion of Hume as a practical philosopher who thought that philosophy could not only discover truth but also improve people’s lives.

The book is structured as seven chapters each dealing with one gerund: governing, under which Watkins considers Hume’s political thought; domineering, in which questions of slavery and priesthood are discussed; working, incorporating Hume’s political economy with particular emphasis on his praise for industry; composing, which is about the production *and* appreciation of beauty and culture; self-loving; loving; and thinking. The lion’s share of the book is made up of interpretation and textual reconstruction of Hume’s *Essays,* backed up with corroborating passages in the *Treatise* and *Enquiries,* and with occasional references to the *History of England* and Hume’s correspondence*.* In the first half of the book, her main interlocutors are historians and political theorists, including Duncan Forbes, Neil McArthur, John Robertson, Dennis Rasmussen, Andrew Sabl and Mikko Tolonen. Much of the sometimes explicit mission in the first half of the book is to make philosophers aware of what has already been long familiar to historians of political thought (see, e.g., 87).

Watkins’s contributions to existing debates are highly informed. Hume’s denigration of slavery in his essay “Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations” (1752) is usually read against the backdrop of the Atlantic slave trade and colonial slavery in the eighteenth century, and as a clue to Hume’s opinion about these practices. The problem with such interpretations, however, is that Hume says very little concrete about “modern” slavery in the essay. Instead, Watkins argues sensibly that Hume’s remarks about slavery are better understood as a point against admiration for the ancients. At the same time, she stresses that his arguments are useful for the debate on slavery in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Pro-slavery writers in the American South (mis)appropriated Edmund Burke’s remark in his 1775 *Speech on Conciliation with America* that free people in slave-holding societies are more strongly attached to freedom because they are more proud and jealous of their liberty (79-80). Hume provides resources for explaining why slavery is bad not only for the slaves but for slaveholders as well. The partial workings of sympathy in a slave-holding society produce bad rather than good effects. As the masters think of their slaves as inhuman, their sympathy with their suffering is more likely to generate hatred and contempt than pity or love (76-8). Even more lamentable, the suffering of slaves could become a source of joy to the masters. Watkins here paraphrases what Hume argues in the second book of the *Treatise*:there is a dark side of sympathy whereby “[s]omeone else’s pain, compared with my own happiness, can augment the pleasure I take in my own state.” (78). Hume’s main point in “Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations” is to point out that the ancient way of life, made possible by slavery, “hardened the character, permitting it to be cruel.” (79). After modern Europe rid itself from slavery (and feudalism), it became a more humane place for masters and servants alike. Watkins’s Hume comes across as a committed though not starry-eyed supporter of modernity, as in the writings of the Scottish Enlightenment scholar Christopher Berry, and indeed as in Harris’s intellectual biography as well.

The book becomes more original as it advances. Whereas the topics of self-love and egotism have received ample attention, when the author turns to aesthetics and sexuality, she moves into more novel territory. Much of the discussion of sex and sexuality seems to revolve around the old debate of whether Hume is a progressive or a conservative, a debate which Watkins sought to sidestep in the first part of the book. Because Hume appears to be open, in extraordinary situations, to other arrangements than traditional marriages, and implies that judgements of marriages and sexuality can evolve, Watkins praises him as a “progressive” in these respects (209). However, she also points out that Hume had conventionally negative views of same-sex attraction, and used the language of “impurity” and “unnaturalness” to describe homosexual acts. It is clear that Hume is not ahead enough of his time for Watkins’s liking. Since Watkins is rather critical of Hume for preferring marriages based on friendship as opposed to sexual love, or at least for his rather low opinion of the latter (200-205), one wonders what she would make of the proto-feminist Mary Wollstonecraft’s similar opinions. We need to remember – as Watkins would certainly agree – that the eighteenth century was long before the sexual revolution of the 1960s, and before abortion had been made medically safe and contraception had become reliable and widespread. Unwanted pregnancies in the eighteenth century could ruin lives, especially those of women. This is likely to have been on Wollstonecraft mind. Would it be too charitable a reading to think that this would have concerned Hume as well?

It is hard to escape the conclusion that Watkins ultimately wants Hume to “see beyond the dominant ethos of his age” (215) and approximate progressives in the twenty-first century on questions of sexuality and gender equality. But the problem with such a desideratum is that it is setting an impossible standard for people in the past to live up to, since it fails to recognize that our views on these and most other matters are culturally specific and historically contingent. As Hume would have been the first to stress, however, something being culturally specific and historically contingent is not the same as it being either arbitrary or not worth preserving and defending.[[1]](#footnote-1) We are right to cherish our progressive attitudes towards sexuality and gender equality and be vigilant of them. But there are much greater threats to these values in the twenty-first century than Hume.

In the final chapter, on “Thinking”, Watkins returns to the book’s starting point: the idea that Hume did not abandon philosophy just because he wrote “polite” essays for a broader audience*.* She argues here that Hume thought that philosophy can endanger politics “when it attempts to transform human nature rather than serve it” (226). More optimistically, however, if philosophy avoids this error and stays clear of partisan politics, it can provide a useful perspective on political questions. As Hume argues in “Of the Protestant Succession” (written in 1748 and published in 1752), only a philosopher without party affiliation can properly assess the pros and cons of the banishment of the Stuart royal line and the Hanoverian Settlement in Britain. Since philosophers will “acknowledge that all political questions are infinitely complicated, and that there scarcely ever occurs, in any deliberation, a choice, which is either purely good, or purely ill”, their guiding attitude will be one of “[h]esitation, and reserve, and suspense”. Such a sceptical standpoint is often going to jar with the impulse of the crowd, which is why Hume says that “if [the philosopher] indulges any passion, it is that of derision against the ignorant multitude, who are always clamorous and dogmatical”. Watkins calls this Humean statement “ugly” (227), but although the wording is not going to suit modern egalitarian tastes, it is hard to argue against the view that ignorant multitudes who are clamorous and dogmatical can present a danger to political health and stability. Of course, derision is unlikely to help. But Hume’s opinion that “the ignorant multitude”, whilst sovereign, “are altogether unfit judges” in detailed political questions is a basic assumption of representative government.[[2]](#footnote-2) Legislators sometimes let the people judge directly, but the recent track record of referenda in Western democracies is a problematic one. As 2008 California Proposition 8 shows, direct popular involvement in concrete political decisions may not lead to the liberalised sexual politics Watkins advocates in the preceding chapter. If we factor in that the multitude in Hume’s day would have been not only illiberal – religious minorities were frequently the targets of riots and mob violence in eighteenth-century Britain – but often almost entirely uneducated, perhaps we need to be more prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt when his formulations upset our modern sensibilities.

Watkins is certainly right that Hume’s sceptical non-dogmatism can be subversive of conservative as well as progressive pieties (240). As she points out in the conclusion: “[w]e think better about each subject when we are in the grip of neither a thesis nor a party.” (245). Agreed, but my overall impression is that Watkins’s book would have benefited from a more sceptical and non-dogmatic attitude towards modern progressivism. This is not the same as being hostile, even if this is the impression often given in today’s increasingly polarized debate. Having said that, Watkins’s book is well-written and thoughtful. I have pointed out that Watkins could have been even more sensitive to Hume’s historical setting when considering his views on sexuality, women, and popular politics. However, it should be noted that she shows contextual sensitivity in general, especially when noting the changing meaning of words (for instance, how in the eighteenth-century “interested” often means “partial” (140)). Hume scholars will find plenty of intellectual stimulation within these elegant yet thought-provoking pages. If Watkins’s book manages to draw the attention of philosophers to the entirety of the *Essays,* it will be a tremendous success.

Max Skjönsberg, University of Liverpool

1. A key example is constitutional liberty in eighteenth-century Britain, which Hume celebrated but believed to be modern and a largely accidental development rather than ancient and inevitable. For this reason, many Whigs viewed Hume as a Tory. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For all citations of Hume’s essay, see *Essays Moral Political and Literary* (Indianapolis, IN, 1985)*,* 507. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)