



**'What's Wrong With Benevolence: Happiness, Private Property, and the Limits of Enlightenment', by David Stove, edited by Andrew Irvine**

Journal:	<i>Australasian Journal of Philosophy</i>
Manuscript ID:	Draft
Manuscript Type:	Book Review
Keywords:	n/a, n/a, n/a

SCHOLARONE™  
Manuscripts

1  
2  
3 Stove, David, *What's Wrong with Benevolence: Happiness, Private Property, and the Limits*  
4 *of Enlightenment*, ed. Andrew Irvine, New York: Encounter Books, 2011, pp.xviii + 221, \$?  
5  
6  
7 (hardback).  
8  
9

10  
11  
12  
13 Benevolence, institutionalized, leads to communism; communism immiserates; ergo,  
14 benevolence is bad. The central thesis of this book, David Stove's parting love-hate letter to  
15 the Enlightenment, is easily summarized: the blame for the evils of communism is sheeted  
16 home to benevolence itself. If that sounds rather crude, it is: the thesis is given some  
17 occasional refinements, but more often stated in this bald form. The genre it belongs to is  
18 polemic, rather than academic scholarship, and accordingly accuracy is not a standard by  
19 which it should be judged: qualification and caution would have weakened it. Stove's style –  
20 rightly praised by his admirers – is itself an Enlightenment essayist's style: powerful, clear,  
21 elegant, often rhetorically unfair, and unsullied by engagement with the arguments of others  
22 or research providing careful evidence for his sweeping claims. This means that nitpicking is  
23 not the right approach to take in assessing it. Instead, one should enjoy the performance,  
24 while noticing the fundamental contradiction that undermines it.  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39

40 The volume contains an essay of about 25,000 words, apparently written in 1989, the year of  
41 the collapse of European communism (and the two hundredth anniversary of the French  
42 Revolution). It is now published posthumously in 16 short chapters, reverently framed by an  
43 editorial introduction and an 84-page bibliography of writings by and about Stove. The title is  
44 the editor's, and is in one way unfair to the author. For Stove does say early on that there is a  
45 benign as well as a dangerous kind of benevolence. The benign kind "is typically local in its  
46 objects, or confined to a special class of people (the sick, for example); whereas dangerous  
47 benevolence typically has for its object all present and future human beings." (p.27) The  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 dangerous kind was invented by the Enlightenment. Before then, there had been Christian  
4  
5 charity, which saw suffering as part of the fallen human condition and as such an occasion for  
6  
7 the practical expression of one's love for one's fellow man. In the early eighteenth century,  
8  
9 unhappiness came instead to be seen as an aberrant condition, caused by remediable material  
10  
11 deprivation. A grand collective project was thus inaugurated: the project of engineering  
12  
13 society to eradicate the material causes of suffering. Enlightenment benevolence, the force  
14  
15 behind that project, accordingly has three distinctive features: it is universal (rather than  
16  
17 local), disinterested (rather than bound up in personal relationships), and external (in seeking  
18  
19 to remove the external causes of unhappiness) (p.27). Its history has been one of repeated and  
20  
21 inevitable failure, culminating in the great catastrophe of Soviet communism.  
22  
23

24  
25  
26 Stove's explanation of this failure has two main branches. The Homeric one is that  
27  
28 unhappiness is an ineradicable part of human life. Eradicating some causes of unhappiness  
29  
30 only means that we will find others. This view, although it has a venerable pedigree, seems  
31  
32 unreasonably progress-blind – as though allowing people to live in boredom were as bad as  
33  
34 leaving them to die of tuberculosis. But it is the other, Malthusian, branch that Stove relies  
35  
36 more heavily upon. State welfare provision to alleviate poverty is self-fuelling. In a market  
37  
38 economy, it works to impoverish the poor further as a class, converting the working poor into  
39  
40 the indigent by driving up the price of food. The attempt to prevent this economic  
41  
42 phenomenon then leads to communism, with its full-scale assault on individual freedom, the  
43  
44 loss of incentives for self-betterment, and the consequent production of collective misery. In  
45  
46 the non-communist world, only contraception, petrol and electricity have forestalled a  
47  
48 complete implosion of the welfare state (p.95). But the basic, self-defeating dynamics are the  
49  
50 same, and we will retain this damaging, misery-producing social structure as long as we  
51  
52 remain in the grip of the ideology of benevolence.  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 What are we to make of this? This line of thought has been a staple of conservative attacks on  
4  
5 the welfare state in a continuous tradition since Malthus, and indeed in part predates him.

6  
7 Reaction against the new Enlightenment conception of benevolence as a social mission  
8  
9 existed from the start: it became sharply focused in the thought of English conservatives as a  
10  
11 pernicious French error leading to the horrors of the Revolution – as in Canning’s “New  
12  
13 Morality” (famously illustrated by Gillray), with its satire on:  
14  
15

16  
17 French Philanthropy;—whose boundless mind  
18  
19 Glows with the general love of all mankind....  
20  
21

22 Here, we already have the charge that an impersonal concern for the welfare of humanity  
23  
24 becomes a licence for producing suffering on a massive scale, as an intended way-station to  
25  
26 eradicating it.  
27  
28

29  
30 The fact that this line of thought is old does not make it wrong, of course. On the contrary,  
31  
32 the economic dynamics that Malthus pointed to are real, and are as evident in systematic  
33  
34 efforts to use the transfer of resources for poverty relief in Central Australia or Africa today  
35  
36 as they were in the application of the English Poor Laws. However, in some parts of the  
37  
38 world, the welfare system does now function efficiently enough to prevent people from  
39  
40 starving to death. The question we face is how to design welfare interventions to target help  
41  
42 to people who would otherwise lack the economic capacity to sustain themselves, while  
43  
44 minimizing the economic damage that causes further poverty. That is a question for empirical  
45  
46 study by development economists. It cannot be answered from the philosopher’s armchair,  
47  
48 even if he has a copy of Malthus in his hand.  
49  
50  
51

52  
53 The underlying contradiction in Stove’s essay is a simple one. You might think that state  
54  
55 welfare provision runs the risk of undermining economic incentives in a way that leads to the  
56  
57 creation of an underclass mired in dispiriting welfare dependency. But to lay the blame for  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 that on *benevolence* has to be a mistake. If you didn't care about other people's welfare, why  
4  
5 would it matter that their lives are empty, or that communism creates misery? Malthus  
6  
7 himself was a utilitarian, after all. It only matters whether organized welfare provision makes  
8  
9 people worse off if it matters whether people are better or worse off.  
10

11  
12 There is another contradiction that Stove may initially sound as though he is inviting. In  
13  
14 attacking benevolence itself, he may seem to be setting himself on the path towards  
15  
16 advocating a wholesale cultural re-engineering to get rid of it – a kind of negative counterpart  
17  
18 of the communist fantasy of remoulding human nature to be more selfless. And if Soviet  
19  
20 communism foundered on the hopeless – indeed, inhuman – impossibility of that aspiration,  
21  
22 it is hard to see why the hopes for the opposite, anti-benevolence project would be any better.  
23  
24 However, that is a trap Stove is careful to avoid. His own title for the book (the one replaced  
25  
26 by the editor) was *That Monstrous Steep, Niagara*. The reference is to his closing vignette: “a  
27  
28 solitary Indian in his canoe,” fishing upstream from Niagara Falls, finds that he is unable to  
29  
30 prevent himself from being drawn on by the current. He tries unavailingly to reach the shore,  
31  
32 but realizes that the current is too strong for him, the precipice too near. “He then ships his  
33  
34 paddle, lights his pipe, and folds his arms.” Stove leaves us with this resonant image.  
35  
36

37  
38 Enlightenment benevolence is too powerful a force to resist; any attempt to counteract it is  
39  
40 vain; we “will, if we are rational, emulate the Indian in the story.” (p.123)  
41  
42

43  
44 But some of us will take care to seal up a final jeremiad before we go.  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50

51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60  
Garrett Cullity

*The University of Adelaide*