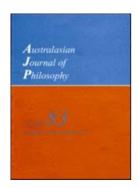
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'What's Wrong With Benevolence: Happiness, Private Property, and the Limits of Enlightenment', by David Stove, edited by Andrew Irvine

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SCHOLARONE™ Manuscripts Stove, David, *What's Wrong with Benevolence: Happiness, Private Property, and the Limits of Enlightenment*, ed. Andrew Irvine, New York: Encounter Books, 2011, pp.xviii + 221, \$? (hardback).

Benevolence, institutionalized, leads to communism; communism immiserates; ergo, benevolence is bad. The central thesis of this book, David Stove's parting love-hate letter to the Enlightenment, is easily summarized: the blame for the evils of communism is sheeted home to benevolence itself. If that sounds rather crude, it is: the thesis is given some occasional refinements, but more often stated in this bald form. The genre it belongs to is polemic, rather than academic scholarship, and accordingly accuracy is not a standard by which it should be judged: qualification and caution would have weakened it. Stove's style – rightly praised by his admirers – is itself an Enlightenment essayist's style: powerful, clear, elegant, often rhetorically unfair, and unsullied by engagement with the arguments of others or research providing careful evidence for his sweeping claims. This means that nitpicking is not the right approach to take in assessing it. Instead, one should enjoy the performance, while noticing the fundamental contradiction that undermines it.

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

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

Stove's explanation of this failure has two main branches. The Homeric one is that unhappiness is an ineradicable part of human life. Eradicating some causes of unhappiness only means that we will find others. This view, although it has a venerable pedigree, seems unreasonably progress-blind – as though allowing people to live in boredom were as bad as leaving them to die of tuberculosis. But it is the other, Malthusian, branch that Stove relies more heavily upon. State welfare provision to alleviate poverty is self-fuelling. In a market economy, it works to impoverish the poor further as a class, converting the working poor into the indigent by driving up the price of food. The attempt to prevent this economic phenomenon then leads to communism, with its full-scale assault on individual freedom, the loss of incentives for self-betterment, and the consequent production of collective misery. In the non-communist world, only contraception, petrol and electricity have forestalled a complete implosion of the welfare state (p.95). But the basic, self-defeating dynamics are the same, and we will retain this damaging, misery-producing social structure as long as we remain in the grip of the ideology of benevolence.

What are we to make of this? This line of thought has been a staple of conservative attacks on the welfare state in a continuous tradition since Malthus, and indeed in part predates him. Reaction against the new Enlightenment conception of benevolence as a social mission existed from the start: it became sharply focused in the thought of English conservatives as a pernicious French error leading to the horrors of the Revolution – as in Canning's "New Morality" (famously illustrated by Gillray), with its satire on:

French Philanthropy;—whose boundless mind

Glows with the general love of all mankind....

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

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

The underlying contradiction in Stove's essay is a simple one. You might think that state welfare provision runs the risk of undermining economic incentives in a way that leads to the creation of an underclass mired in dispiriting welfare dependency. But to lay the blame for

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

There is another contradiction that Stove may initially sound as though he is inviting. In attacking benevolence itself, he may seem to be setting himself on the path towards advocating a wholesale cultural re-engineering to get rid of it – a kind of negative counterpart of the communist fantasy of remoulding human nature to be more selfless. And if Soviet communism foundered on the hopeless – indeed, inhuman – impossibility of that aspiration, it is hard to see why the hopes for the opposite, anti-benevolence project would be any better. However, that is a trap Stove is careful to avoid. His own title for the book (the one replaced by the editor) was *That Monstrous Steep, Niagara*. The reference is to his closing vignette: "a solitary Indian in his canoe," fishing upstream from Niagara Falls, finds that he is unable to prevent himself from being drawn on by the current. He tries unavailingly to reach the shore, but realizes that the current is too strong for him, the precipice too near. "He then ships his paddle, lights his pipe, and folds his arms." Stove leaves us with this resonant image. Enlightenment benevolence is too powerful a force to resist; any attempt to counteract it is vain; we "will, if we are rational, emulate the Indian in the story." (p.123)

But some of us will take care to seal up a final jeremiad before we go.

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