

WHAT'S WRONG WITH BENEVOLENCE: HAPPINESS, PRIVATE PROPERTY, AND THE LIMITS OF ENLIGHTENMENT

'Will enlightened people ever learn that benevolence, if directed to relieving poverty and equalizing wealth, always tends to make poverty widespread?' (p. 83)

By David Stove

Encounter Books, New York, 2011

\$17.03; 221 pages

ISBN 139781594035234



Thus, 23 years ago, did an exasperated David Stove sum up his theme in this intellectually bracing and morally acute book, which he wrote as an essay a few years before he died in 1994. Its provenance in Stove's writings is discussed in an excellent foreword by Roger Kimball, editor of the *New Criterion*, who remarks, 'the most thrilling intellectual discovery of my adult life came in 1996 when I chanced upon the work of the Australian philosopher David Stove.' This is followed by an illuminating introduction by Andrew Irvine.

Stove (1927–94), former associate professor of philosophy at the University of Sydney, is not widely known outside professional philosophical circles, within which he was greatly respected. Apart from being a brilliant teacher and the object of much student affection, he attracted international attention for his philosophical studies and contributions to many subjects beyond technical philosophy. Above all, he was a devastating polemical critic of the varieties of political correctness, social justice, and (as he called them) the intellectual 'slums' now so much in evidence.

He directs this talent to analyse and critique 'benevolence' as both a private motive and a principle that animates aspects of governmental actions, notably welfare policy. Private benevolence driven by generous motives expressed in voluntary philanthropy or kindness might, or might not, confer actual benefit for the recipient. Sometimes the benefit is manifest, but we all know examples of misplacement, such as the benevolently

indulgent parent who may 'spoil' a child, and, on the other hand, instances of well-directed rescue of the starving by a supply of food from a voluntary charity, or spontaneous action by individuals to help restore the homes of others damaged by natural disasters.

But when governments abstractly purport to act benevolently, their coercive powers are necessarily exercised in disposing money appropriated from their citizens for achieving ends and arrangements that may or may not be achieved or which, when achieved, may have unforeseen consequences that work against the interests of both putative beneficiaries, taxpayers, and the common wealth.

In considering the origins of the benevolence movement that came to the fore with the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century and its development in the nineteenth, Stove distinguishes and contrasts the emergence of systematic investigation of economics and demographics in the hands of economists such as Adam Smith and Thomas Malthus with the distinct and sudden growth of a 'benevolence' movement directed towards advancing the 'happiness' of mankind in general that was unprecedented in human history.

When a Condorcet, a Bentham or Marx plans for universal happiness, there is 'nothing in it' (as we say) for Condorcet,

Barry Maley is a Senior Fellow at The Centre for Independent Studies.

Bentham, or Marx himself. Whereas, of course, when a father plans his child's happiness, or a teacher his pupil's, or a friend his friends, there is something in it, should the plan succeed, for the father, teacher or friend: there is the increased affection of the child, the gratitude of the pupil, strengthened friendship with the friend. (p. 27)

So, this *interested* link in private and voluntary benevolence is absent in the state benevolence to be dispensed in a society-wide political movement with three main characteristics: *universality* (all present and future human beings); *disinterestedness*; and *externality*, where happiness is to consist not in changing people directly but by changing their external circumstances such as through money, housing, or new legal rights. Stove goes on to say this 'needs only the additional element of popularity to be extremely dangerous.' (pp. 27–28)

Energising this movement was a moral-sentimental transformation:

Suddenly, the *softening* of human life became the great desideratum. The genius of Rousseau made the shedding of tears the hallmark of moral elevation: a thing which was, with good reason, without precedent in European life. Classes of people who had previously been only on the margin of the moral map, or off the map altogether—children, women, servants, the poor, prisoners, the insane, slaves—found themselves all at once at the center, and the object of a powerful outpouring of benevolence. Every earlier human landmark of moral authority, whether dating from antiquity or the Christian centuries, was buried under a tidal wave of benevolence. Leonidas and St. Anthony, Cato the Elder and Joan of Arc, Luther and Loyola, all met a common doom; and the new moral hero, to replace all these, who was he? Why, the benevolent man, 'The Man of Feeling.' (p. 33)

This is the man, intoxicated with 'moral vanity,' who now flourishes everywhere in developed societies, personifying the wave of abstract compassion and universal caring that, together with 'equality,' became the validating elements for widespread redistribution of wealth.

This is the man, intoxicated with 'moral vanity,' who now flourishes everywhere in developed societies.

As Stove comments:

Equality as a moral value is, of course, something quite different from the egalitarianism which was also an axiom of the Enlightenment. *That* was the belief that human beings are *naturally* equal. What I am here speaking of is the conviction that every privilege, advantage, or superiority of one human being over another is *morally* wrong.

From this axiom, many important Enlightenment theories obviously follow: for example, an enmity to kings, and to parents. But another and even more important theorem flows from this same axiom: communism, or an enmity to private property. This has often not been recognized as an Enlightenment theorem at all; yet its derivation is very obvious. For what inequality is more cruel, more glaring, or more arbitrary than inequality of property? What inequality brings so many other inequalities in its train? There ought *always*, therefore, to be equality of property, and there is only one way of ensuring *permanent* equality of property: community of property. (p. 35)

Here were the seeds of the communism that followed in the twentieth century and which, ironically enough, became a vehicle both for equality of poverty and misery for the masses and outrageous privileges, wealth and power

for their masters. However, Enlightenment thinking ranged widely and included those who saw immediately the implications for disaster of radical social and economic equality. Those ‘economists,’ broadly considered to include others than Adam Smith—such as Bernard Mandeville, Thomas Malthus, and David Hume—were among its early critics. Stove quotes a prescient passage from Hume published in 1751:

Stove’s overriding purpose is to draw attention to the profound moral and attitudinal changes implicit in the working out of the benevolence and happiness movement and its powerful influence on politics and economic life.

But historians, and even common sense, may inform us, that, however specious these ideas of *perfect* equality may seem, they are really, at bottom, impracticable; and were they not so, would be extremely pernicious to human society. Render possessions ever so equal, men’s different degrees of art, care and industry will immediately break that equality. Or if you check these virtues, you reduce society to the most extreme indigence; and instead of preventing want and beggary in a few, render it unavoidable to the whole community. (p. 42).

This was a line of thought seized upon by Malthus as he considered the Poor Laws of Elizabethan England and their effects, problems and implications for later developments. As Stove points out, Malthus was as desirous as any other man to relieve the distress of his fellow countrymen, and he agreed (pp. 49–51) that the Poor Laws helped relieve distress among the poor and unemployed. He nevertheless concluded that they must tend to create more poor since their support creates social and economic costs that must be borne, at least in part, by the

non-indigent and lowly paid, at least some of whom will themselves be forced into poverty and dependence. Moreover, aware that public succour is available for the needy, the poor will perhaps be encouraged to abandon any effort to support themselves and instead seek public support. And, of course, those already in receipt of support are no longer under the pressure to support themselves that would otherwise be there.

Stove quotes Malthus:

The poor-laws may therefore be said to diminish both the power and the will to save among the common people; and thus to weaken one of the strongest incentives to sobriety and industry, and consequently to happiness.

And later on:

To the laws of property and marriage, and to the narrow principle of self-interest which prompts each individual to exert himself in bettering his condition, we are indebted for all the noblest exertions of human genius, for everything that distinguishes the civilised from the savage state.

Stove’s overriding purpose is to draw attention to the profound moral and attitudinal changes implicit in the working out of the benevolence and happiness movement and its powerful influence on politics and economic life. This is the subject matter of the last third of the book, which is devoted to a discussion of the persistence of socialist thinking and extensive welfare in the developed countries, the continuing fascination and dismay with inequalities of wealth, and the continued calls for higher taxation and more redistribution.

Stove was realistically pessimistic about the prospects of escape from the grip of ‘benevolence’ in the modern welfare state and the interest-group politics with which it is associated. Perhaps he might have been encouraged by the present-day critique of welfare and the manifestation of its problems in

recent financial crises, which in turn implicate the fundamental democratic problem of public choice electoralism.

We could be sure, though, that he would have been a trenchant critic of the emergence of current measures to subvert property rights and to control the citizenry that are latter-day developments of ‘benevolence.’

He would have had a field day with current events such as the huge socialistic ‘co-investment’ by the federal government to protect the decrepit car industry, and the intrusive authoritarianism of the ‘nanny state’—a term whose nursery mildness softens the subversive attack on responsible, individual autonomy that it is. This has consonance with ‘benevolence’ and the pursuit of ‘happiness’ by purporting to act in the name of our safety and security, while generating the servility that goes with state regulation and control of what should be free decision-making about how we and our children go about our daily business. Control is increasingly the objective in more and more of what we do, the purchases we make, what we eat, the attitudes we take, and even what we say and write. The means are state surveillance, regulation, petty interference, and sometimes worse. I leave the reader to think of examples.

As for the attack on property rights, this is part of the daily fare of every business in the country and those who work in them or ‘own’ them. The attack does not take the form of simple expropriation of property; rather, it takes

the more sinister and sneaky form of destroying the legal power to control and manage that defines property rights. The attack extends to the individual right of adults freely to bargain and determine the terms under which they will offer their services in making a living.

Stove is a versatile philosopher and acute critic who is as comfortable and enlightening in the broader fields of intellectual controversy as he is in the exacting discipline of philosophical scholarship and criticism.

Calling this suffocating embrace, and the large-scale redistribution and ‘churning’ of wealth, as no more than benevolent concern for our welfare is a stroke of genius. Unmasking its character and its dangers, moral and material, is Stove’s intention. He addresses it with polemical verve and insight in this important book that should figure as part of the moral and intellectual armoury of every liberty lover.

Stove is a versatile philosopher and acute critic who is as comfortable and enlightening in the broader fields of intellectual controversy as he is in the exacting discipline of philosophical scholarship and criticism. For those interested in pursuing his writings (and responses to them), this book contains an exhaustive and valuable bibliography of Stove and related writings.