

CLIVE HAMILTON, THE UNIVERSE, AND EVERYTHING

Clive Hamilton asks some interesting questions but gives unconvincing answers, writes **Jeremy Shearmur**

The Freedom Paradox: Towards a Post-secular Ethics

by Clive Hamilton

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Readers of *Policy* may have encountered Clive Hamilton as director of the Australia Institute, and more generally as an all-purpose pundit who dislikes commerce, growth, and much that the readers of *Policy* are likely to favour. In *The Freedom Paradox*, Hamilton offers a diagnosis of what he thinks is wrong with current Western societies, together with a response. The problems Hamilton is concerned with are social—they relate to his view of the impact upon us of some features of ‘commercial society.’ Rather than responding in the social terms that his problems would require, Hamilton instead offers us some moral ideas that he attempts to support by sharing with us the secret of the universe. What he offers here is a mix between ideas drawn from ‘Eastern’ mysticism and the German philosophers Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer.

When he gets in to philosophy, Hamilton is dealing with difficult material, but what he offers

is poor. Not only is the viability of the mixture of views that he favours dubious; Hamilton misunderstands the ideas of people of whom he is critical, such as Hayek, engages in panoptical punditry, and is dismissive of those who disagree with him or who develop their views about such matters in more detail and with more care.

Yet, Hamilton raises some important problems. In what follows, I will discuss these, and then explain what Hamilton’s approach is, and why it is not a good one. I will conclude by making a suggestion about a way in which some of Hamilton’s concerns might be responded to in ways that might be more congenial to the readers of *Policy*, but not, I suspect, to Hamilton.

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Problems

One important problem Hamilton is concerned with is an old one that goes back at least to the time of Adam Smith. It concerns what happens to us in ‘commercial society.’ This, as Smith argued, allows for the generation of wealth through the extended social division of labour. At the same time, Smith recognised, the specialised tasks we are engaged in may not be good for our bodies or minds. Smith was also concerned about how in his own society, the wealthy showed signs of becoming interested in the pursuit of ‘baubles’ and ‘trinkets’ that did not deliver the kinds of satisfactions they promised. He was also worried that the pursuit of fashion by the rich might set a bad model for the poor. Smith raised all this as a problem, but he judged that the overall consequences of the kind of society that was coming into being were desirable. As Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff argued in their introduction to *Wealth and Virtue*, Smith’s view was that the benefits, especially to the poor, of the operations of a commercial society outweighed the loss of ‘virtue’ they involved.¹

Hamilton does pose a real challenge here: just what is the relation supposed to be between freedom and living a good life?

Since Smith wrote, it might be argued that the balance between advantages and disadvantages has shifted (as Hamilton has suggested in his other books). But Hamilton’s view here is jaundiced. A ‘mounting orgy of consumption and pleasure-seeking’ is not, as he would have it, ‘the only plausible explanation for the reverence with which all segments of society regard economic growth’ (112). There have been significant improvements in well-being since the period after World War II, during which I grew up. And if one is to engage with those who would follow Smith, one cannot—as Hamilton is at times willing to do—simply discount desirable social consequences that follow from self-interest or ‘vice.’

Another problem concerns freedom and its relation to well-being. Hamilton—I think

correctly—argues that in countries like Australia, people now enjoy a much greater degree of personal freedom than they did in the past. While what we have is not necessarily what those who argued for personal liberty wished for—government seems ever keener on regulating everything, regardless of its knowledge and competence, and we have also suffered frightening losses in liberty as collateral damage from George Bush’s war on terror—Hamilton raises a pertinent point in asking, has liberty made us happier?

The situation here is rather complex. First, Hamilton takes a very broad view of his target, running together liberal economists who might be somewhat conservative in their personal views, and people from the late 1960s who favoured personal liberation but may often have had socialist economic views. He also has some odd notions about the ideas of those he criticises. For example, he attributes J. S. Mill-style views about the cultivation of individuality to Friedrich Hayek, when Hayek explicitly criticised ideas of this kind, for example in his essay ‘Individualism: True and False.’²

Hamilton writes as if the people with whom he disagreed thought that liberty as such would make one happy. I would have thought that in these people’s view, the point of liberty was in part to change some things that quite clearly made for unhappiness, and to allow people to make choices which would make them happy if they chose well.

There is also an issue I have heard Peter Saunders of CIS discuss: that there is a difficult problem about class here. Those who argued for greater personal freedom in the 1960s and 1970s were typically people who could cope—both intellectually and financially—with the problems it might lead to, such as the breakup of families, which became more likely with easier divorce. What, Saunders argued, looks as if it has made for some bigger problems, has been the dissemination of ‘libertarian’ attitudes to those less able to cope. All told, however, it is not clear that anyone is likely to favour our freedoms being systematically removed, even if they lead to problems. Most of us value freedom as important in itself, and the task of resolving these problems without betraying our liberty is important. But Hamilton does pose a real

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Finally, Hamilton is concerned with problems about the impact upon us of the spread of commercialisation. He is worried that commercial pressures will distract us from things that really matter, and from what he terms ‘inner freedom,’ toward short-term satisfactions that may not be good for us. This is a reasonable concern, but Hamilton’s response to it does not seem right.

This response is to set out what he thinks good moral values would be in this context, and then to offer us a view of the universe that is supposed to support them. But given his own diagnoses of our problems, this would not seem particularly pertinent, even if it were done well, for the issues Hamilton is concerned with are problems that relate specifically to the kinds of societies those in more affluent countries are now living in, and to freedoms which come with greater affluence, including the ability to get away from those other than the government who exercise control over us of a kind that we do not relish. What is needed, I would suggest, are ideas that speak to our specific social circumstances, and to the kinds of issues that arise within them, not more general claims about values and the nature of the universe.

Indeed, what we seem to need are arrangements that do not compromise our freedom but help us make sensible choices between ideals (for some may be pernicious) and then offer us the possibility of pursuing ideals with like-minded others in ways that, if we so wish, shelter us from commercial pressures which would be destructive to our ideals and to ourselves. To this matter, I will turn briefly at the end of this review. First, I need to say something about the details of Hamilton’s views.

The universe and everything

Hamilton shares with his readers his view of the universe and of its relation to morality. Hamilton is enamoured of some ideas from Kant and Schopenhauer that he links to ‘Eastern’ mysticism. He believes that there is a mystical unity to everything—or at least everyone—and that an experience of this underpins the concern we should have for others, and how we should lead our lives. I do not wish to begrudge Hamilton his particular values and view of things. But the

account that he gives here is replete with problems. He offers poor arguments for his views, and the patronising attitude he takes towards professional philosophers does not help his presentation. Hamilton has entered their field; and if they do not like some of his views, or write in ways he thinks lack popular appeal, there may be good reasons for this. In addition, he offers us, without argument, *ex cathedra* pronouncements on a wide range of social issues. This part of Hamilton’s book feels like the work of an overconfident amateur.

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But what is Hamilton up to?

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant was struck by the contrast between the immensely successful physical theories of Isaac Newton, and the Scottish philosopher David Hume’s doubts about how any such knowledge could be based on experience. In addition, Newton’s impressive scientific theories were deterministic in their character—if they were true, then it was not clear how humans could have free will. Kant resolved these problems by offering a striking but strange theory—that the world as studied by science, and as we experience it in our day-to-day lives, is not real, but is a construction that rational beings create by imposing innate organisational principles upon experience. Kant’s views explain how it is possible to have knowledge like Newton’s on the basis of experience. But because this knowledge is only true of how things appear (phenomena) rather than of what things are like in themselves (noumena), it is possible that we may have free will. Arthur Schopenhauer, who has made a great impression on Hamilton, offered a further interpretation of these ideas, in which he also made certain links between them the Upanishads and some themes in Buddhism. If the reader wishes to discover what Hamilton is doing here, they might find it useful first to have a look at an overview of Schopenhauer, such as that in the online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.³

Hamilton is influenced by his reading of Schopenhauer, but adds his own twist to it. In his view, mystical experience is to be understood as experience of the noumenal. He suggests that this can be translated into a feeling of compassion towards others. Hamilton tells us that ‘the basis of morality lies in identification of the Self with the universal essence’ (160). It is suggested that this ‘foundation of morality in participation ... is central to the teachings of the East.’ Further, ‘arising from metaphysic[al] empathy ... compassion and the will to justice are the natural seeds of all morality.’ From this we move to the specific ethical ideas of Schopenhauer: ‘Injure no one; on the contrary help everyone as much as you can.’ Further guidance is to be drawn from ‘great cosmopolitan spirits,’ of whom recent exemplars are Mohandas Gandhi, the Dalai Lama, and Nelson Mandela. Underlying Hamilton’s approach are ideas about identifying with others: ‘as we strip away selfishness and disown malice we inevitably identify with others, participating in their essence,’ a process which ends with our ‘giving up the self,’ and giving up the world of phenomena (170). There is also a notion of ‘eternal justice,’ which depicts a person who commits a crime against another as committing it against himself, and also stresses that when people die, their ‘universal Self merges with the absolute.’

Hamilton favours neither indulgence nor asceticism, but detachment.

In the final part of his book, Hamilton returns to his initial problem—that we have striking kinds of freedom of choice, but are subject to various kinds of manipulation. He writes here of ‘the opportunity to become autonomous individuals that was opened up by affluence and the liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s,’ but suggests that freedom has to come from the manifestations of the ‘moral Self’—from the material discussed in his metaphysical ideas.

In more practical terms, Hamilton favours neither indulgence nor asceticism, but detachment. He is sceptical about the possibilities for most

people of religion, but suggests instead what looks like his own metaphysics, along with themes from Jungian psychology, and possibly a concern for the protection of the environment or an appreciation of art. But what of his solution to the problems he started with? We are led back to some material from much earlier in the book—the idea that there are three different competing versions of a good life. First, there is a ‘pleasant life,’ or hedonism (which he suggests typically does not make us happy). Second, there is a good life, which Hamilton depicts in rather narrow terms, as a view that applies rationality and self-control to overcome the impulsiveness of a ‘pleasant life.’ Finally, there is the meaningful life, which is explained in terms of being committed to something larger than oneself. This, Hamilton wishes to gloss in terms of his metaphysics. In a final, short chapter, he surveys themes from Kant, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche—suggesting in the end that our ordinary lives have a purpose (which might seem difficult to explain if one was attracted to his metaphysics). It is for ‘the noumenon to recognise itself through the phenomenon.’ The ideas here are a little like a Hamiltonian version of the German philosopher Hegel, but his treatment of what this amounts to is mercifully short.

Appraisal and an alternative

There are various problems with Hamilton’s ideas. Where he offers arguments for his views, they are typically not telling, and I was led to wonder if he had ever discussed his views with a professional philosopher. There are also internal difficulties about them. For example, while mystical experience is widely reported on, it is not obvious that we should take it as having any deep significance (as opposed, say, to its being the kind of thing that happens to people under what are typically strange conditions or when taking strange substances). There is also the problem of what we are to make of a linguistic and thus conceptual report on something that, within the Kantian tradition Hamilton is working in, is not open to our conceptual knowledge. More generally, we might wonder how Hamilton’s own ideas are to be fitted together with the material he wishes to take over from Schopenhauer.

The following difficulty is even more serious. One of Hamilton's key concerns relates to the way he thinks that 'inner freedom' is undermined by features of existing commercial societies. To this, I have suggested, what seems needed is a social remedy, just on the grounds that the problems seem specific to societies like ours. But Hamilton's response in the end reaffirms the importance of inner freedom while offering us some speculative metaphysics as reinforcement.

Insofar as his concerns are genuine, is there something an alternative solution—which is compatible with human freedom? I cannot address this issue at any length here, except to say that this is a problem with which commerce may assist us! For as I have discussed in a previous issue of *Policy*, the Disney Corporation's town of Celebration in Florida offers an interesting model of a commercial development of a town dedicated to the pursuit of particular ideals.⁴ By choosing to live there, people submit themselves voluntarily to a range of regulations related to those ideas, and from which commercial pressures of the kind that Hamilton so dislikes are excluded. It suggests a model that might be applied more widely, and even to Hamilton's particular ideals. Further, as Celebration is not a closed community, what happens there is open to scrutiny, by the media or anyone else. If such places answer some of Clive Hamilton's problems with contemporary society, perhaps he should abjure metaphysics and instead embrace the Mouse.

Endnotes

1. Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff, 'Needs and Justice in the Wealth of Nations,' in *Wealth and Virtue*, ed. Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). See also Ignatieff's discussion of Smith and Rousseau in *The Needs of Strangers* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1984).
2. Included in Friedrich Hayek, *Individualism and Economic Order* (London: Routledge, 1949).
3. 'Arthur Schopenhauer,' *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (17 November 2007), plato.stanford.edu/entries/schopenhauer/.
4. See Jeremy Shearmur, 'Living with a Marsupial Mouse,' *Policy* 18:2 (Winter 2002), www.cis.org.au/Policy/winter02/polwin02-4.pdf.

THE KEVIN 07 STORY

Jason Aldworth finds that the story of Rudd's rise is better told than the story of Howard's fall

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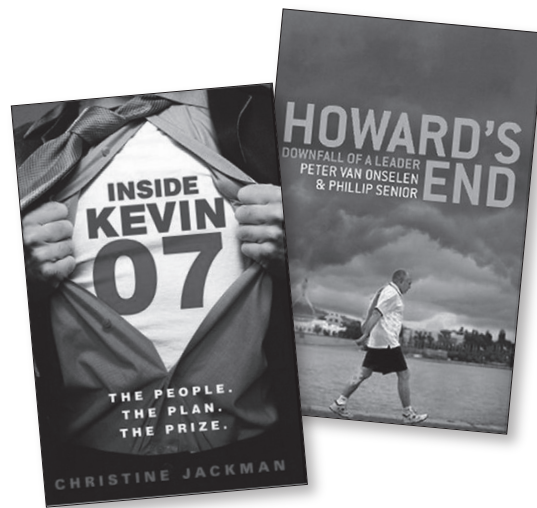
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The first rule of political campaigning is that you must reinforce your base and win over the persuadable swing vote. You should use three key tactics. First, strengthen the positive perceptions that the electorate has about your candidate. Second, reinforce an existing prejudice that voters have about your opponent. Third, frame the election as being about issues that play to the positive perceptions of your candidate (and the negative prejudices held of your opponent).

In the 2008 United States presidential election, the strategic hinge of the Democratic campaign was to reinforce the prejudice, in an electorate that was yearning for a change of national direction, that a John McCain presidency would be no change at all. The Democratic campaign effectively handcuffed McCain to the electorally unpopular President George W. Bush, to neutralise McCain's image as a Washington maverick.

Conversely, the macro-level strategy of the Republican campaign was to reinforce the electorate's prejudice that a candidate who has never held an executive office is not ready to be the commander in chief of the world's most powerful country.

In the 2007 Australian federal election, the themes, perceptions, and prejudices were different, but the campaign principles of reinforcing your political base, persuading the swing vote, and framing the question remained the same.

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