

ON
ENLIGHTENMENT

David Stove

Andrew Irvine
editor

With a preface by Roger Kimball

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Transaction Publishers

New Brunswick (New Jersey) and London (UK)

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This book is printed on acid-free paper that meets the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials.

Library of Congress Catalog Number: 2002073210

ISBN: 0-7658-0136-1

Printed in Canada

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Stove, D. C. (David Charles)

On enlightenment / David Stove ; edited with an introduction by Andrew Irvine ; with a preface by Roger Kimball.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-7658-0136-1 (alk. paper)

1. Enlightenment. I. Irvine, A. D. II. Title.

B802 .S76 2002

190—dc21

2002073210

This book is dedicated to the victims
of September 11, 2001.

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Preface

Anyone interested in ideas will fondly recall the intellectual excitement that comes with discovering a writer who opens up new avenues of insight. For most of us, such discoveries taper off with the end of college or graduate school. We continue to read, stumble occasionally on excellent authors who had been hitherto unknown to us, but that frisson of discovery becomes rarer and rarer. It was with immense gratitude, then, that I first encountered the work of the Australian philosopher David Stove (1927-1994). It happened in 1996 while I was reading Keith Windschuttle's superb book *The Killing of History*. In a section dealing with recent examples of irrationalism in the philosophy of science, Windschuttle drew on some arguments that Stove made in his book *Popper and After: Four Modern Irrationalists* (1982, republished by Transaction in 2001 as *Scientific Irrationalism: Origins of a Postmodern Cult*). The bits that Windschuttle quoted were plenty impressive. But when I scoured up a copy of Stove's book (which had been out of print for some years), what I found far exceeded my wildest expectations. Here was a thinker of incandescent brilliance, astonishing depth, and side-splitting wit.

Stove's book was a revelation. Among other things, it supplied some unanswerable arguments to bolster my longstanding prejudice against the work of Thomas Kuhn. I had always suspected that there was something fishy about Kuhn's account of the way scientific theories develop. Stove showed that I didn't know the half of it. Kuhn took care to deny that he was an irrationalist. But Stove showed that Kuhn's celebrated notion of "paradigm change" provided not an account but a repudiation of scientific development. Kuhn covertly substituted sociology and history for logic, thus winding up with a picture of science in which progress is illusory and no scientific theory can be said to be better or worse than another. Stove traced Kuhn's irrationalism back through Karl Popper's philosophy of science (another fishy specimen) and ultimately to Hume's skepticism about the cogency of inductive arguments.

Stove's book on the cult of irrationalism in the philosophy of science is a masterpiece. Considered as a work of philosophy, it is an exemplary, indeed a breathtaking, production. Stove's mastery of the subject is nothing short of dazzling. And considered as a work of literary art, the book is again a masterpiece. Quite apart from being a devastatingly astute philosophical critic, Stove is one of the best and funniest philosophical writers in the history of the discipline. I know, I know: that is a large claim. But please, read a dozen pages of his book on irrationalism before suggesting that I exaggerate.

I hadn't quite finished *Scientific Irrationalism* when a friend told me about *Darwinian Fairytales* (1995), Stove's posthumously published attack on Darwinism. Among educated persons today, any suggestion that aspects of Darwinian theory are suspect is instantly met with contempt, pity, derision—anything but a mind open to rational persuasion. Crackpot creationists are anti-Darwinian, ergo anyone who challenges Darwinian dogma must be a creationist, a crackpot, or both. This is not the place to rehearse Stove's arguments; let me just plead that you reserve judgment until you read what Stove has to say. Take a look, for example, at "Darwinism's Dilemma," the first chapter of *Darwinian Fairytales* and reprinted in *Against the Idols of the Age* (Transaction, 1999), my anthology of writings by Stove.

After reading and re-reading these two books, I went on to read just about everything that Stove had published. Some of it is technical philosophical work revolving around the so-called "problem of induction." Stove worked hard to show that probabalistic reasoning, *pace* Karl Popper, was the friend of science. Some of Stove's work was on other aspects of philosophy or what we have since come to call "political correctness." In *The Plato Cult* (Oxford, 1991), Stove anatomizes philosophical idealism and other intellectual follies; in *Cricket versus Republicanism* (Quakers Hill, 1995), his executors gathered a brilliant miscellany of essays on (mostly) extra-philosophical topics. When I tell you that one of these essays is titled "The Intellectual Capacity of Women" and that its first sentence reads "I believe that the intellectual capacity of women is on the whole inferior to that of men," you will understand that David Stove was not a man who shied away from controversy.

Stove was that rarest of creatures: a genuinely independent thinker. His allegiance was always to the best argument, the most persuasive

reasoning. This made him difficult to categorize, impossible to pigeon-hole. Stove's favorite philosopher was David Hume. Stove saw in Hume a man devoted to intellectual sanity, to patient reasonableness, to what Hume called "the calm sunshine of the mind." But Stove's admiration did not prevent him from criticizing Hume. For example, Stove showed that Hume's attack on inductive reasoning proceeded from "deductivism," from a conviction that the only arguments that were really compelling were those that were valid in the strict logical sense of the term. This had the effect of sharply depreciating Hume's faith in observation and experience—odd for a philosopher who was an avowed empiricist. But Stove shows that it was precisely the combination of deductivism, on the one hand, and empiricism, on the other, that led to the distinctive irrationalism that has infected modern philosophy of science from Popper forward.

Stove was himself a man "of no religion," but he also took issue with Hume's contempt for religious belief. Although religion offered no balm for him, Stove understood that for the majority of mankind religion has served through the centuries as a profound consolation. This is not to say that Stove was uncritical of religion. On the contrary, he was often withering. But he understood, in a way that escaped his hero David Hume, that whatever its blindnesses and depredations, religion had also served as a great human resource.

Stove's binocular vision on the issue of religion also characterized his position on the Enlightenment and "enlightened" thinking in general. (What Stove says about the Enlightenment holds as much for fifth-century Athens as it does for eighteenth-century France.) In some respects, Stove was a paradigmatic Enlightenment thinker. He prized reason highly, sought to expose superstition, and could have adopted Kant's formulation of the Enlightenment motto—*Sapere aude!*, "Dare to Know!"—as his own. But about the Enlightenment as about everything else, Stove was the opposite of doctrinaire. "Enlightened opinions," he saw, "are always superficial." Consider the Enlightenment's attack on religion and established authority as nothing more than a repository of superstition. "If," Stove argues, "priests, kings, soldiers, doctors (and so on) were nothing more than Enlightenment can see in them—if they were, in plain English, confidence men—then virtually the whole of human history would be unintelligible." If one side of the Enlightenment was embodied in Voltaire's demand "*écrasez l'infâme*," another side was embodied in

the French Revolution and its witch's brew of "revolutionary republicanism, regicide, anti-religious terrorism, and the deliberate destruction, for the sake of equality, both of thousands of innocent people and of high culture in any form."

All of which is to say that the impulse to Enlightenment is very much a mixed blessing. To be sure, few of us would wish to do without the benefits of the Enlightenment. As the sociologist Edward Shils pointed out in his book *Tradition* (Chicago, 1981), the Enlightenment's "tradition of emancipation from traditions is . . . among the precious achievements of our civilization. It has made citizens out of slaves and serfs. It has opened the imagination and the reason of human beings." Nevertheless—as Shils also understood—to the extent that Enlightenment rationalism turns against the tradition that gave rise to it, it degenerates into a force destructive of culture and the manifold directives that culture has bequeathed us. Like so many other promises of emancipation, it has contained the seeds of new forms of bondage.

These are truths that David Stove understood with penetrating insight and expressed with inimitable flair. In assembling this invaluable chrestomathy of Stove's writings in and about enlightened thinking, Andrew Irvine has performed a great intellectual and a great moral service. While some of the essays in this volume are available in other anthologies, others Irvine has rescued from oblivion. The concluding essay, "Why You Should Be a Conservative," is one of several masterpieces in the book and is itself worth the price of the volume. In a thoughtless moment, Aristotle defined man as the "rational animal." David Stove showed that "ludicrously self-satisfied" comes closer to the truth than "rational." The amazing thing is that, while he gingerly picked his way through that graveyard of absurdity that we dignify with the name of intellectual history, David Stove managed to strengthen our allegiance to "the calm sunshine of the mind." Even in his criticism of enlightenment Stove remained a partisan of enlightenment. It was an extraordinary performance. Andrew Irvine deserves our gratitude for capturing some of Stove's most illuminating sallies.

Roger Kimball
Norwalk, Connecticut
June 2002

Introduction

David Stove on Enlightenment[†]

Andrew Irvine

At very few times during the history of the world have people been lucky enough to live during periods of enlightenment. One of the earliest and most famous such periods occurred during Greece's Golden Age, when science and democracy tentatively began to push back the forces of superstition and oligarchy. It was a time when the franchise of even the lowest citizen was equal to that of the aristocrat, and when omens and augury began to recede in the face of observation and reason.

Admittedly, even during this remarkable period in Greek history, enlightenment was not universal, and it did not last long. In Athens, the most democratic of the Greek city-states, citizenship was a privilege enjoyed by few. Slavery remained the life-blood of the economy and the tyrant was never far from power. Newly emerging theories of science and philosophy met with resistance from sophist and priest alike and, by modern standards, democratic and scientific aspirations remained embryonic. Even so, prior to the general intellectual deterioration brought about by Roman expansion, the Athenian enlightenment was unlike anything the world had previously witnessed.

The inevitable decline was neither immediate nor absolute. In Greece, as elsewhere throughout the Roman world, engineering continued to be important for centuries, and Roman artists, like Roman architects, soldiers, lawyers and accountants, continued to be well paid. But with Roman roads came the spread of Christianity, and with Christianity came the re-emergence of superstition and an increasing indifference to the democratic principles upon which Athenian civil society had been based. By 529, when the Emperor Justinian finally ordered the closure of Plato's Academy, clearly an

era had ended. As Gibbon tells us, despite Plato's anti-democratic views, Justinian's action not only eliminated the last center of pagan learning within the Christian world, it also brought to an end "the long list of Grecian philosophers, who may be justly praised, not withstanding their defects, as the wisest and most virtuous of their contemporaries."¹

Like the enlightenment of ancient Greece, the enlightenment of eighteenth-century Europe again emphasized liberty, equality, rationalism, secularism, and the connection between knowledge and human well-being. Traditional sources of authority, such as the crown and the church, were viewed, not just with suspicion, but with hostility. Experience and reason, not fideistic revelation, were championed as the only legitimate sources of human knowledge. Horrible burdens such as hunger, disease, and even war were to be eliminated through advances in science and the redistribution of political power. In post-revolutionary Britain, France, and America, the rise of democracy brought with it the spread of liberty and equality, and human happiness quickly became the yardstick by which moral, political, and even scientific advances were to be measured.

Of course, even during this period of rapid scientific and political development, illiteracy, superstition, disease, and poverty remained widespread. In the West, as elsewhere throughout the world, slavery remained all too real, and it would not be until the twentieth century that a genuinely universal franchise would be adopted by any of the world's leading democracies. Nonetheless, by the end of the eighteenth century, a new period of enlightenment clearly had arrived. Science and democracy were once again in the process of triumphing over religion and feudalism. The newly initiated industrial revolution stood ready to tame a recalcitrant nature, and a new age of individual rights and liberties had begun to dawn. The perfectibility of man was no longer assumed merely as an abstract goal, but as nearly actual reality.

Still, in one sense this new European enlightenment came to an end as quickly as had the enlightenment of ancient Greece. The high degree of violence associated with the French Revolution served to discredit many enlightenment ideals, at least in the short term. Under the influence of Rousseau and his contemporaries, the romantic movement gained momentum and, as it did, human sentiments and passions began to eclipse abstract notions such as

reason and rationality. Hume's dictum that a wise man proportions his belief to the evidence was put to the test and found wanting for, as Stove observes, "arguments, especially if they have disagreeable conclusions, are seldom a match for very strong feelings."² Soon, Marx was to find a ready and receptive audience for his claim that arguments favoring private property merely reflected middle-class prejudices and, by the beginning of the twentieth century, Freud's hypothesis that all so-called "sound reasons" were nothing but excuses for action postulated by unconscious desires had become all the rage. To all outward appearances, the age of reason had come to an end as quickly as it had begun.

Yet, in another sense, the enlightenment of the eighteenth century clearly had a more lasting impact. Throughout both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the scientific impulse remained strong—stronger, in fact, than it had ever been in history. Despite periods of ascendancy, the influence of both church and crown continued to decline, and democratic ideals continued to serve as models for humanitarian reform. Contemporary theists, postmodernists, New-Agers and conspiracy theorists notwithstanding, it is this very same period of enlightenment that lingers on throughout the Western world to this day.

Like eighteenth-century authors such as Baron D'Holbach, most of us continue to believe that "the source of man's unhappiness is his ignorance of nature."³ Increased medical knowledge helps alleviate disease; increased yields in harvest are due to our much-improved knowledge of agriculture and plant genetics; by harnessing new forms of energy, the necessity of physical labor continues to be reduced; and the more we learn about different cultures, the easier it becomes to live in harmony with our neighbors.

Just as during the time of Pericles, most of us also believe that human happiness and prosperity are directly related to the spread of democracy. Democracy not only encourages free trade, it also requires near universal literacy and a widespread, detailed knowledge of the world we govern. As Pericles says in his famous *Funeral Oration*, within a democracy "each individual is interested not only in his own affairs but in the affairs of the state as well: even those who are mostly occupied with their own business are extremely well informed on general politics—this is a peculiarity of ours: we do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business; we say that he has no business here at all."⁴

The opening of the political process to all citizens thus not only increases human freedom, it also improves the quality of political decision-making; it not only recognizes individual rights as a cornerstone of our corporate life together, it increases the likelihood that decisions in the public sphere will be made for the good of all. Thus even today, liberty, equality, secularism, and utilitarianism remain the most widely accepted touchstones of social progress, and advances in science and education remain the vehicles by which this progress is recognized to have spread throughout the world.

As familiar and appealing as this picture may seem, it is exactly this uncritical endorsement of enlightenment values with which David Stove takes issue.

* * *

David Stove is a difficult thinker to categorize. He was a capitalist who cared little for money, a conservative who was passionate about the environment, and an atheist who recognized the comforts of religion. He was a writer who argued passionately against communism, but who became worried when he saw communist Europe collapse as quickly as it did. He was a philosopher who, rather than founding a particular school of thought, encouraged students to follow the evidence wherever it might lead, and a writer who openly advocated conservatism at a time when its defense within the Western world's universities was "unheard of; and if it were heard of, would be felt to be obscene, or—much more likely—assumed to be a joke."⁵

During his lifetime, he was also the subject of controversy. According to one commentator, reading him was "like watching Fred Astaire dance. You don't wish you were Fred Astaire; you're just glad to have been around to see him in action."⁶ According to another, his writings exhibited little more than a "gross display of bigotry" and the man himself was nothing more than a "culturally disabled ignoramus."⁷

Which account is correct? To those who knew him best, David Stove was just what he appeared: a cheerful but slightly pessimistic, slightly withdrawn Hume scholar. As a young man, he exhibited talent both in sports and in music, but his love of the mind drew him to philosophy. For most of his adult life he taught at Sydney University where he was known primarily for his work on probability theory and the problem of induction.⁸ Time not spent in the classroom or in the library was spent, together with his wife, tending their garden.

This is not to say that Stove shied away from expressing his conservative political views in public. In his later years especially, he wrote as often for public affairs magazines such as *Commentary*, *Encounter*, and *Quadrant*, as he did for scholarly journals. A harsh critic of all types of social engineering, Stove also felt deeply about issues relating to overpopulation, the environment, and consumerism in general. In his writings, not only do we find unfashionable warnings about the ever-present dangers of communism, we also encounter an often humorous but deeply heart-felt lament for modernity itself.

For example, here he is commenting on a widely accepted component of twentieth-century epistemology, so-called “social explanations” of knowledge:

I have heard a Marxist “explain” Darwin’s theory of sexual selection as being just a “reflection” of middle-class Victorian courtship practices. Nowadays, of course, this kind of thing is all the rage: I mean, pretending to explain the currency of a scientific theory, or a philosophy, by reference just to the historical circumstances of its origin, especially the “class origins” of its propounder or adherents.

It is a stupid and discreditable business. To talk about Darwin as though he were some simple mechanical toy is discreditable, unless your mental powers happen to be much superior to his: a condition seldom satisfied by anyone, and never, one may safely say, by Marxists.⁹

By way of explanation, Stove continues,

In this particular case the business was so stupid as to be embarrassing, since it is well known that other middle-class Victorian naturalists, including some of the most Darwinian, denied the very existence of sexual selection. But the stupidity which is common to all such “explanations” is, of course, simply that of proceeding as though the *merits* of a theory—such things as truth, or probability, or explanatory power—could not possibly be among the reasons for its currency.¹⁰

In much the same vein, here he is commenting on the effects that Marxism, semiotics and feminism have had upon arts faculties around the world in general, and upon his own in particular:

[The result is] a disaster-area, and not of the merely passive kind, like a bombed building, or an area that has been flooded. It is the active kind, like a badly-leaking nuclear reactor, or an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in cattle. ... So far as there still survives anything of value from the Western tradition of humanistic studies, it is in spite of most of the people in the universities who are the heirs of that tradition.¹¹

Similarly, here he is writing about education and the common man:

Most people find their own lives quite interesting enough, in fact painfully interesting, without putting themselves to the pains which are inseparable from getting *entrée* into physics or philosophy or philology. To sit quietly alone for hours, thinking about some difficult question, in which you yourself have nothing to gain or lose—this is how some of us spend much of our lives, but to most people it is a purgatorial prospect. Noise, company, joint occupation, the excitements of war or power or money or sex or sport: these are the things which make up most people's idea of time well spent.¹²

As Roger Kimball has remarked, in Stove's writings "there is something to offend nearly everyone."¹³

Much to his own surprise, Stove also found himself criticizing the ideas of one of his intellectual heroes: Charles Darwin. The more he thought about human nature, the more he became convinced that Darwin's theory of evolution is unable to account for much of human development. On Stove's view, evolutionary factors need to include "such things as pride, prejudice, and prudence."¹⁴ According to this view, people's "interests, abilities, character, tastes, intelligence, information, beliefs, upbringing, [and] circumstances"¹⁵ all play a significant role, not just with regard to individual action, but with regard to evolution itself. Yet such factors remain absent from Darwin's theory. As Stove explains it,

I have no difficulty in accepting the *fact* of evolution. The proposition, for example, that existing species have all evolved from others, is not at odds with any rational belief that I know of. But I do not believe the Darwinian *theory* or explanation of evolution.¹⁶

Darwin may have been in the ballpark but, in the case of man, he was far from having hit a home run.

For Stove, exactly the same shortcoming holds of more recent evolutionary accounts as well. For example, here he is commenting on the work of Richard Dawkins:

I'm not an admirer of Dawkins' selfish-gene theory. It is simply another one of those "people are mere puppets" theories, which everyone has met dozens of, and which philosophers have met far more than other people do. The suggestion is that we are not causal agents, only patients; that whatever we say or do, it is not really us saying or doing, but God, or gods, or Satan, or demons, or History, or our diet, or our sex-drives, or our parents, or the climate, or the ruling class ... *etc., etc., ...* or our genes. ... what a bore!¹⁷

Thus, according to Stove, anyone who wants to integrate a scientific understanding of human development with what we know about human nature and human behavior will have to do more than postulate a theory in which human beings exist only as "simple mechanical toys."

It was in this context that Stove became a critic of many enlightenment ideals. Egalitarianism, perfectionism, utilitarianism: none have turned out to be the panaceas that enlightenment thinkers assumed them to be. For example, here he is commenting on the widespread practice of using the word “egalitarianism” as a term of approbation:

[When hearing “egalitarianism” used this way I am] thunderstruck. I would as soon have expected to hear “destructive” used as a term of praise; or to hear “ignorant,” or “bloodthirsty,” used so.¹⁸

Like Burke and other enlightenment commentators, Stove sees the modern world’s quest for universal equality as being, not just unrealistic, but positively harmful.

Related to this, Stove also believes that it is a mistake to place happiness above all other goods. For example, this is what he says about utilitarianism and its emotional and intellectual connections to communism:

Lenin, Stalin, and the rest, would not have done what they did, but for the fact that they began by wishing the human race well. Communists differ, of course, from other Friends of Humanity, in certain beliefs that they have about the conditions necessary for achieving human happiness. But the emotional *fuel* of communism has always been the same as the emotional fuel of all utopianisms: the passionate wish to abolish or alleviate human misery.¹⁹

Not only is universal human happiness something incapable of being achieved through social planning, the very idea that a subjective notion, such as happiness, could run proxy for more objective goods struck Stove as fundamentally mistaken. So, too, did the idea that all instances and forms of human happiness are equally valuable. Any parent would be criticized, and rightly so, for buying beer for himself at the expense of shoes for his children, even if the relevant amounts of happiness dictated this to be the proper course of action. Despite his atheism, Stove thus found himself keeping company with unexpected bedfellows:

I find the religious business quite incurable. Yet my estimate of human life is essentially the same as that of (many) religious people. ... The idea that human life can be made happy, or even (for most people) bearable, by money, or medicine, or leisure, or sex, or science—or, in general, by manipulating our bodies and our environment—is to me a gigantic and pernicious illusion. But that is precisely what the Enlightenment always promised, and still does.²⁰

Not unexpectedly, such similarity of views brought him little pleasure: “If this gives me—as it does give me—a certain affinity with Christians, Marxists, and various other people whose opinions I despise, I am sorry for it. But it can’t be helped.”²¹

As a result of these frustrations, Stove set for himself the task of developing a more integrated view of human nature, one capable of encompassing man both as an object of scientific study and as an active free agent.²² One consequence of this work was that, in addition to his academic writings, Stove occasionally began to write on explicitly political themes. However, the results were not always as one might have hoped. When Stove spoke out against affirmative action in the early 1980s, members of the Australian parliament did little more than debate whether he was “a perceptive and balanced observer”²³ or an “innumerate” and “outrageous” discredit to the public university in which he served.²⁴

Despite the controversy, clearly he said things that needed to be said. For example, when the Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Stove’s home university, a Professor A.J. Dunston, reported to great acclaim both that the percentage of women faculty being appointed had doubled within a very short period of time and that, as in all previous years, such appointments remained free from all forms of significant bias, Stove raised the obvious question. How could these two claims be reconciled? Was the new applicant pool significantly different in composition from that of previous years? Apparently not; but if not, how could such a remarkable increase occur without there having been bias in favor of men in previous years, or in favor of women during more recent years?

The short answer was that it could not, and soon the university administration was forced to retract its figures and admit that no significant increase in the percentage of female appointments had taken place. Stove’s response was impeachment at its most telling:

Even if Professor Dunston has got it right *this* time—a very big “if,” obviously—his mistake is surely a little hard to understand. To count the numbers of men and women appointed to his university in a certain short period: this is not a task, one would have thought, to over-tax the powers of a Deputy Vice-Chancellor. His mistake is so extraordinary, in fact, that some feminists probably now think that his original statement was intended to mislead them. But no one who knows Professor Dunston will suspect him of having any such intention.²⁵

As Kimball so tactfully puts it, “David Stove would not have been made to feel welcome at many American colleges or universities.”²⁶

Even so, many students found him to be ideal as a teacher. As James Franklin writes, Stove's students "were less concerned, on the whole, than his colleagues by the extreme nature of some of his opinions. He showed that the range of what could reasonably be thought was wider than one had imagined; at his best, logical consequence could seem putty in his hands—and it is one of the most recalcitrant of materials, as any philosopher or mathematician knows. He gave permission, so to speak, to think outside the mainstream—if reasons for doing so could be found."²⁷ Similarly, Susan Tridgell sums up Stove's teaching this way: "I can still remember the intellectual freedom his classes gave (a greater freedom than I have ever known before or since). As an eighteen-year-old girl in Australia in the mid-1980s, it was extraordinary to be addressed in exactly the same way, in the same tone, as the seventy-year-old male student sitting beside me. In David Stove's classes, bodies did not exist. Only minds mattered."²⁸

The result was teaching at its best. To someone who hasn't experienced it, the exhilaration of being introduced to important, new ideas is difficult to convey. Yet it is this exhilaration that motivates, not only many students, but many teachers as well. In the words of Stove's long-time colleague, David Armstrong,

The relation between a teacher who has something to teach and a student who wants to learn is one of the most fulfilling and least threatening of all human relationships. So I think David found it. With his quick perception of character, with his ready but disinterested response to style and looks, he aroused great affection, along with a delighted appreciation of his eccentricities, among both his male and female students. It can be said of him, as the great David Hume, to whom our David paid so much philosophical attention, said of himself, that his company was "not unacceptable to the young and careless, as well as to the studious and literary."²⁹

* * *

Many critics argue that enlightenment values may be acceptable in principle but that, over the centuries, they have taken root far too slowly, and been interpreted far too narrowly, to have had much practical significance. According to this view, early enlightenment thinkers did nothing to correct the marginalization of women and minorities within society. They failed to recognize the moral necessity of abolitionism, and failed to implement a universal franchise. Enlightenment doctrines, such as Locke's theory of property, meant

that so-called “civilized societies” were free to conquer or assimilate less technologically advanced aboriginal peoples. Unrestricted trade led to great inequalities of wealth, and policies such as universal education were honored more often in their absence than their observance. The claim is thus also made that reforms in favor of liberty, equality, and other enlightenment ideals have often been adopted only in order to advance middle-class interests.

To consider one example, what good is a commitment to political equality without a similar commitment to economic equality? Or as Bertrand Russell puts it, “If one man offers you democracy and another offers you a bag of grain, at what stage of starvation will you prefer the grain to the vote?”³⁰ Without economic equality there will remain, not only inequalities of power, but inequalities of happiness as well. Economic equality thus becomes paramount, not only for the utilitarian, but for any advocate of enlightenment values, and the fact that great inequalities of wealth remain to this day is seen by many as a significant shortcoming of the enlightenment ideal.

To consider a second example, what good is liberty in the absence of opportunity? Here the concern is that liberty alone can hardly be expected to serve as a source for equality. As Anatole France has famously written, only when there is true equality of opportunity will laws “which forbid rich and poor alike from sleeping under bridges, from begging in the streets, and from stealing bread”³¹ become acceptable. Thus, once again, even today many people believe that there remains a need for significant—even revolutionary—social change in favor of an expanded set of enlightenment values.

In contrast, Stove believes that many enlightenment values are unacceptable, not in practice, but in principle. For example, consider again the axioms underlying utilitarianism. For Stove, not only is it a mistake to believe that all human goods can be reduced to human happiness. It is also a mistake to accept the Greatest Happiness Principle, the principle that an action is morally correct if and only if it promotes the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Such a principle requires us to predict each action’s consequences on a very broad scale. Yet this is clearly impossible. Not only do we not know the subjective preferences of most of the world’s population, society itself is so very complex that predicting the consequences of any but the most local actions is never within our reach. Other than in our own small corner of the world, how can we know which actions will increase human happiness and which will not?

On Stove's view, any benevolence principle that takes as its object humanity as a whole—rather than, say, oneself, or one's family, or one's employees—is thus bound to fail. The results, as in the case of twentieth-century communism, can be devastating. As Stove himself concludes, "I think that utilitarianism, and the benevolence-commandment which is a logical consequence of it, is the main thing which has dismantled European civilisation since about 1789."³²

Even so, Stove is not insensitive to the many merits of enlightenment thought. He champions the use of reason and rationality. He recognizes the falsity of religious claims and the importance of individual liberty and, like most authors within the modern period, Stove sees himself as an advocate for much within the enlightenment point of view.³³ What he rejects is the enlightenment's uncritical optimism regarding social progress and its willing embrace of revolutionary change.

This point of view was ultimately adopted by another famous twentieth-century thinker, John Maynard Keynes. According to Keynes, the main mistake that he and his generation made was that

we repudiated all versions of the doctrine of original sin ... We were not aware that civilisation was a thin and precarious crust erected by the personality and the will of a very few, and only maintained by rules and conventions skillfully put across and guilefully preserved. We had no respect for traditional wisdom or the restraints of custom. We lacked reverence ... for everything and everyone. It did not occur to us to respect the extraordinary accomplishment of our predecessors in the ordering of life (as it now seems to me to have been) or the elaborate framework which they had devised to protect this order.³⁴

Like Stove, Keynes thus came to argue against the view that there is

a continuing moral progress by virtue of which the human race already consists of reliable, rational, decent people, influenced by truth and objective standards, who can be safely released from the outward restraints of convention and traditional standards and inflexible rules of conduct, and left, from now onwards, to their own sensible devices, pure motives and reliable intuitions of the good.³⁵

After all, what evidence is there that, left to their own devices, individuals will always choose the morally appropriate action? Or that the satisfaction of individual preferences will always lead to justice? What evidence is there that the elimination of superstition will inevitably lead to happiness? Or that the promotion of equality will lead to utopia on earth? What evidence do we have that the enlightenment's liberal, rationalistic outlook will ever lead to the kind of social progress envisioned by its advocates? As Stove sees it, de-

spite their best intentions, social reformers who attempt to improve the world as a whole inevitably make things worse, not better.

Stove is not the first conservative thinker to criticize enlightenment values in this way. He has been preceded, not only by such famous authors as Edmund Burke and James Fitzjames Stephen, but by many modern authors as well. Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) was not only a masterful defense of traditional liberties, privileges and responsibilities. It was also a powerful attack on the extremes of the French Revolution and a prophetic warning about the future rise of totalitarian communism. Similarly, Stephen's *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity* (1873) contains a point-by-point reply to the arguments found within Mill's *On Liberty* (1859), rejecting both Mill's uncritical acceptance of enlightenment values and his sentimental utopianism. More recently, Leo Gershow's *From Despotism to Revolution, 1763-1789* (1944) and *The Era of the French Revolution, 1789-1799* (1957), and Carl Becker's *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (1932) have raised many of the issues that concerned Stove, although Stove would not have been at all attracted to some aspects of these critiques, such as Becker's historical relativism.

Other authors, too, have advanced political ideas that are in some respects similar to Stove's: William Bennett, Allan Bloom, William Buckley, David Frum, John Kekes, Russell Kirk, Irving Kristol, Isabel Paterson and many others have all been effective in advancing contemporary conservative (and neo-conservative) opinion. On the less socially conservative side, authors such as Milton Friedman, David Gautier, Friedrich Hayek, Robert Nozick, and Ludwig von Mises have also all been influential. Even so, among recent authors it has typically been left to Stove to remind us of the many connections between enlightenment values and anti-conservative thought more generally, especially as these connections have arisen over such a broad range of human history. In addition, few contemporary political authors have displayed the sharp wit that earmarks so much of Stove's writing.

Stove's primary argument in favor of conservatism falls into two main parts. First, there is the observation that today's social structures are so large and so complex that any widespread social reform will have innumerable unforeseen consequences. At the same time, since innovations for the worse always outnumber innovations for

the better, these unforeseen consequences will be at least as harmful as they are beneficial. The result, says Stove, is that “if anyone gets to try out in practice his new idea for repairing or improving our society, it is something like billions to one that he will actually make things worse if he changes them at all. Of course it is possible that he will make things better, but that is trivially true: it is possible, after all, that a furious kick will repair your ailing TV set.”³⁶

By devoting more and more resources to the welfare state, for example, we unexpectedly discover that individual initiative is diminished. By introducing pesticides designed to increase the quality of our food supply, we unexpectedly discover that our water table has become contaminated. By popularizing university education, we unexpectedly discover that academic standards are declining. By raising the minimum wage, we unexpectedly discover that employment levels begin to fall as employers find it necessary to lay off workers. By placing a bounty on rat tails in order to decrease a city’s vermin population, we unexpectedly discover that we have caused the rat population to increase, as people begin breeding rodents in order to supplement their meager incomes. By permitting only vehicles with odd- or even-numbered license plates to enter the city on odd- or even-numbered days to reduce air pollution, we unexpectedly discover that pollution increases, as people buy additional cars so that they may own vehicles with both odd- and even-numbered plates. The list of such examples is surely endless.

Stove summarizes this part of his argument as follows:

This is the oldest and the best argument for conservatism: the argument from the fact that our actions almost always have unforeseen and unwelcome consequences. It is an argument from so great and so mournful a fund of experience, that nothing can rationally outweigh it. Yet somehow, at any rate in societies like ours, this argument never is given its due weight. When what is called a “reform” proves to be, yet again, a cure worse than the disease, the assumption is *always* that what is needed is still more, and still more drastic, “reform.”³⁷

It follows that at the very least we should adopt a “go slow” attitude with regard to wide-scale social change. In addition, since it is governments that almost always have the monopoly on such change, it will be government actions about which citizens need to be the most wary. If you or I individually make a mistake with our household budget, this mistake has the potential to throw our family’s finances into turmoil. If a government makes a similar mistake, it will have the potential to harm millions of households. Smaller, less

intrusive governments not only increase personal freedom, they also decrease the risk of wide-scale social harm.

The second part of Stove's argument is based on the observation that, just because something is wrong or harmful, it need not follow that reforms ought to be implemented to try to eliminate it. Sometimes we simply have to accept the lesser of two evils. As Stove puts it,

It does not follow, from something's being morally wrong, that it ought to be removed. It does not follow that it would be morally preferable if that thing did not exist. It does not even follow that we have any moral obligation to *try to* remove it. X might be wrong, yet every alternative to X be as wrong as X is, or more wrong. It might be that even any attempt to remove X is as wrong as X is, or more so. It might be that every alternative to X, and any attempt to remove X, though not itself wrong, inevitably has effects which are as wrong as X, or worse. The inference fails yet again if, (as most philosophers believe), "ought" implies "can." For in that case there are at least some evils, namely the necessary evils, which no one can have any obligation to remove.³⁸

If this is correct, the assumption that all wrongs ought to be reformed clearly fails to be justified. Social change may be desirable in some sense but, desirable or not, unless there is some realistic hope that change will be for the better, such desires are best ignored. "It should go without saying," Stove sums up, "that conservatives will often *mistakenly believe* that a certain evil is a necessary one, or that the alternatives to it are all at least as bad, or that any attempt to remove it will have consequences even worse. Such mistakes are, of course, the very staple of the rhetoric of 'reformers,' and they are indeed common. But we must simply 'divide through' for them, because it is certain that the opposite mistakes are made at least as often by the other side."³⁹ Reforms, when they are to be made at all, must be realistic, local, and necessary.

This view clearly has consequences for another main enlightenment theme, namely assumptions about the perfectibility of man. If, as enlightenment reformers have always believed, "the characters of men originate in their external circumstances,"⁴⁰ the means of reform appears to be close at hand. Through scientific discovery and universal education, all human shortcomings should be capable of elimination. However, as Stove is at pains to point out, education is not the remedy that enlightenment thinkers have always hoped it to be.

To begin, not everyone *wants* to be educated. As Stove puts it, "What is geocentrism or heliocentrism to most human beings? What is Newton's theory of gravitation, or Mendeléev's table, or quantum

mechanics or its successor?"⁴¹ Add to this the fact that not everyone is *capable* of being educated or, at the very least, that this capacity comes in greatly varying degrees. Then add the fact that the enlightenment assumption that people's characters are fully determined by their environment is plainly false. In Stove's words, "How could any sane parent of two or more children ever have believed that all children possess equal native endowments of mind and body, or that they will all respond in the same way to the same external circumstances?"⁴² Finally, add the fact that, despite several centuries of educational experimentation, people still remain attached to superstition and false belief, and that religious wars and racial and cultural intolerances continue to flourish. It is hard not to conclude that expectations concerning the perfectibility of man are more a product of pure human hubris than rational expectation.

* * *

David Hume died in 1776, the universally respected and much loved intellectual leader of the Scottish Enlightenment. He survived just long enough to receive news of the eagerly anticipated American Revolution. The enlightenment values of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" were at long last sweeping the globe.

In a similar way, David Stove survived just long enough to witness the eagerly anticipated fall of the Berlin Wall and, with it, the collapse of European communism, two events that he had hardly dared hope to see during his lifetime. Still, the experience was bittersweet: "I did not ever want—no conservative should have wanted—the Russian empire to collapse as *quickly* as it has done. The *very* best that the bits remaining can look forward to—I'd say—is *local* Stalinism; and they'll be lucky to get that."⁴³ Today his words appear prophetic, in large measure because no countries—especially those lacking a history of reliable democratic institutions—remain immune from the many pressures and tendencies that give rise to totalitarianism.

The result, according to Stove, is that "very far from communism being dead, as some foolish people at present believe, we can confidently look forward to bigger and better Marxes, Lenins, Stalins, Maos, Kim Il Sungs, Pol Pots, Ceausescus, Baader-Meinholds, Shining Paths, and all the rest, with ever-increasing destruction both of life and of culture, down 'to the last syllable of recorded time.'"⁴⁴

How are such catastrophes to be avoided? Stove was not hopeful that they could be. He believed it unlikely that the pressures and forces that give rise to totalitarianism could ever effectively be curtailed. For example, since it is impossible to proscribe even the *advocacy of communism*, is it not likely that communism itself must eventually take root?

That it would be helpful if such views could be proscribed, Stove accepted almost without question. In essence, his argument runs as follows: Advocacy of certain actions (say, the practice of arson, or the assassination of political leaders, etc.) is inconsistent with the flourishing of any civilized society. Thus the proscription of such opinions is not just of benefit to civilization, but necessary for its very existence. In Stove's words,

Which opinions a government ought to proscribe obviously depends, in many cases, on existing circumstances. During a war, for example, or during a financial panic, or during a time of intense racial antagonism within a society, it may be a government's duty to proscribe certain opinions which, at other times, it ought to let alone. Equally obviously, there are certain opinions which ought to be proscribed at all times, such as the ones mentioned above about arson or assassination. Now, is the opinion that everyone ought to be equal ... one of those which ought to be proscribed at all times? I think it is, and my reasons are these: that the opinion, that everyone ought to be equal, leads, by logic which is clear to even the meanest intelligence, to the opinion that private property ought to be abolished; and that *that* opinion is, above all others, destructive both of life and of culture. Compared with the opinion that everyone ought to be equal, the opinion that arson is innocent, or that government officials ought to be shot, are minor moral eccentricities.⁴⁵

However, as Stove himself argues, given that proscription of such opinions is impossible, it follows that civilized society, at least in the long run, is likely to collapse into communism, totalitarianism, or some other equally inhuman regime. Like many conservatives, Stove doubted that liberty could serve as an effective check against such reprehensible forms of government.

But it is at this point that Stove falls victim to an important equivocation. For while certain widespread *actions*, such as arson or assassination, are clearly inconsistent with the flourishing of civilized society, it is less clear that mere *advocacy* of such actions falls into this same category. After all, mere opinion, in and of itself, is never harmful. Even the opinion, say, that political leaders (or university professors, or expectant mothers) ought to be randomly assassinated, is not harmful in the way that actual assassinations are. As Thomas Jefferson puts it, mere belief "neither picks my pocket nor breaks

my leg.”⁴⁶ Rather, in order to make the case that the advocacy of such actions is inconsistent with the existence of civilized society, some quite strong connection needs to be made between this advocacy and the corresponding harm. For example, can it be shown that advocacy of such actions inevitably *causes*, or in some other way generally *leads to*, the harm in question? Perhaps surprisingly, the answer is no.

Why is this? If the *act* of arson is so clearly harmful, why is *advocacy* of arson in any way less so? The answer is simply that, in a great many circumstances, advocacy of arson fails to lead to arson. Instead, in many circumstances the advocacy of arson decreases, rather than increases, the likelihood that arson will occur. The reason is that, once the advocate of arson is identified, concrete steps are inevitably taken to decrease the risk of harm. If he is a child, most people will do their best to keep him away from matches; if he is an adult, they will do their best to keep him away from their (or other people’s) property. If he is a child, they will try to explain to him why endangering lives and harming other people’s property is wrong; if he is an adult, in all likelihood they will also alert the authorities. What almost never happens, upon hearing the advocate of arson state his preferred course of action, is that we simply go about our daily business. Even less likely is it that we will all become arsonists ourselves. Intelligent arsonists, if they care at all about being caught, act only under the cloak of darkness and never breathe a word about their actions to any but their closest confidants. Publicly advocating arson is the single action most likely to shorten an arsonist’s career.

The same is true in more overtly political contexts. For example, ask yourself whether the toleration of hate speech is ever beneficial. Perhaps surprisingly, the answer is yes. Although hate speech sometimes advances the goals of its advocates, it much more often effectively identifies society’s hate mongers and, having done so, it allows us to take issue with what they say. Tolerating hate speech means that the advocates of hatred (holocaust deniers, white supremacists, black radicals, etc.) rarely, if ever, get elected to political office. Such people almost always receive far fewer votes than even the largely anonymous names and faces we sometimes support as part of local electoral slates, or that we support simply because we are dissatisfied with a current incumbent. Simply put, we

know what such people stand for and, because we have allowed them to speak their minds, we recognize that they do not represent either us or our values.

Outlawing hate speech makes it much more difficult to discover just who the hate mongers are. It is not a coincidence that many who advocate stricter laws banning the expression of hatred also advocate the increased use of surreptitious surveillance to help law enforcement agencies root out such people once they are forced to conduct their business in secret. Much more efficient is the option simply of allowing people to speak their minds, even on the most offensive and controversial of topics.

Permitting unwelcome or unpopular speech forces us to pay attention to social ills, and to confront and address hateful stereotypes. For example, denials of the Holocaust have been a great spur to the careful historical documentation of Nazi atrocities. It has also encouraged the pursuit and prosecution of war criminals and the commitment of resources to fight racism and all manner of other prejudices against minorities.

Regardless of one's political preferences, attempting to address perceived social ills without allowing the advocates of these ills to speak their minds is as difficult as attempting to diagnose and treat a disease without being able to observe any of its symptoms. Allowing our political opponents to speak their minds not only alerts us to the presence of social ills, it helps us discover just how widespread and how entrenched these ills may be.

Of course, it should go without saying that the advocacy of certain opinions often does increase the likelihood of harmful action, but from this it does not follow that the elimination of this advocacy would lead to the elimination of the corresponding harm. Even less does it follow that the best way to reduce the likelihood of such actions lies with censorship. Actions done in secret are always more difficult to discover than those which have been more openly advocated. In addition, it is never a simple task to discover which opinions will lead to harmful action and which will lead to an improved social environment. Learning that some people welcome the existence of child pornography does not guarantee that parents will take extra precautions safeguarding their children, but it makes it much more likely. Learning that some nations favor policies of ethnic cleansing does not guarantee that the international community will

intervene, but if it does not we can hardly conclude that a lack of knowledge on our part would have made such events less likely.

In other words, it remains possible to agree with most of what Stove says without concluding that liberty of speech inevitably leads to liberty of action, or that principles of toleration inevitably weaken our ability to resist the intolerant. Of course, Stove's worry is clear enough. Says Stove,

We set ourselves to achieve a society which would be maximally tolerant. But that resolve not only gives maximum scope to the activities of those who have set themselves to achieve the maximally intolerant society. It also, and more importantly, paralyzes our powers of resistance to them, and evidently must do so. It is this logical problem, as much as anything, which has nullified internal resistance in the West to Communist power.⁴⁷

But here, once again, there is a clear equivocation between speech and action. Allowing others to speak their minds need not mean agnosticism on our part. Tolerating intolerant opinion is not the same as agreeing with it. Nor is it the same as tolerating intolerant action. Nor is it the same as ignoring such opinion, or refusing to speak out against it, or failing to encourage others to do the same. In fact, unless there is free and open debate about when and under what circumstances particular actions are to be made illegal, how can we, in a democracy, be confident that the law we have chosen is correct? Tolerating divergent viewpoints is an essential first step in ridding society of all types of social harm.

Thus we see that the mere advocacy of a harm, as opposed to the harmful action itself, has many positive consequences. We also see that, in many circumstances, these positive consequences far outweigh the negative. To assume otherwise is to assume exactly what Stove denies, namely that human beings are nothing but "simple mechanical toys", mere puppets who are unable to reason for themselves and who will be swept into agreement by every fast-talking politician or con-man.

* * *

Despite their different political perspectives, David Stove was an avid reader of John Stuart Mill. Stove disagreed with Mill on any number of topics, but regularly returned to his writings and clearly felt indebted to them. Explains Stove,

Mill made a number of valuable contributions to philosophy. But nearly all of them were of a most unusual kind, in that they were involuntary. They consisted in his *making an important mistake clearly*. They were therefore like the involuntary contributions to geography which were made by early navigators, when their ships foundered on previously uncharted rocks.⁴⁸

This is no empty praise or backhanded compliment. As any writer knows, clarity of exposition can be a daunting goal. In addition, the task of just “getting it right” is always more intellectually demanding than one at first expects. In philosophy, this is doubly so. Not only are the concepts involved highly abstract, one is also constantly required to compare one’s views to those of some of the greatest thinkers known throughout history. In fact, Stove goes on to state that, for his own part, he wished that he

could feel sure of having done, even involuntarily, a tenth as much as Mill did for the instruction of future students of philosophy. Most mistakes in philosophy are either not important, or are not made clearly enough to enable the mistake to be detected. But L.T. Hobhouse spoke the truth, and bestowed very high praise on Mill, when he said that Mill, like all other philosophers, made mistakes, but that, unlike most others, he wrote in such a way that it was possible for his mistakes to be found out.⁴⁹

It should go without saying that clarity of exposition was simply the least of Stove’s many intellectual virtues, both as a philosopher and as a social commentator. Not only was he one of the most precise and articulate philosophers of his day, he was also one of the most insightful. As Peter Coleman has put it, in his intellectual work Stove was someone who

never trimmed a theme to personal advantage, always preferring the play of argument and the flow of logic wherever it might lead. He had a jeweler’s eye for a fake (like George Orwell, to whom he dedicated one of his philosophical books) and a deep commitment to what David Hume called “the calm sunshine of the mind.” You would never agree with him on a number of issues—he had, as it were, his own voices which some of us did not hear—but no one denies his disinterestedness, courage or style.⁵⁰

Whether you agree with David Stove or not, it is difficult to read him without being enriched by the experience.

Notes

- † I would like to take this opportunity to extend my thanks to Guy Richards for sharing his David Stove correspondence with me. This material has proved to be invaluable for piecing together, not only the chronology, but also the substance of Stove's thought. I would also like to thank Stove's literary executor, James Franklin of the University of New South Wales, for allowing me to quote from both Stove's published and unpublished works. I am also indebted to him for his helpful advice on a wide variety of topics. Finally, I would like to thank Anthony Ellis and Blackwell Publishers for allowing me to reprint several paragraphs of material that originally appeared in *Philosophical Books*, 43 (2002), pp. 39ff.
1. Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-88), Vol. 4, London: Methuen and Co., 1909, pp. 283f.
 2. David Stove, "A Promise Kept by Accident," this volume, p. 38.
 3. Baron D'Holbach, *The System of Nature* (1770), New York: Burt Franklin, 1970, p. viii.
 4. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1954, p. 147.
 5. David Stove, "Equality and Culture" (1990), unpublished, ms. p. 7.
 6. Michael Levin, "Popper and After," *Quadrant*, June 1983, p. 81.
 7. B.C. Birchall, in "A Farewell to Arts: Replies to David Stove, with his Rebuttal," *Quadrant*, July-August, 1986, p. 9.
 8. Among David Stove's most important publications are the following: *Probability and Hume's Inductive Scepticism*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973; *Popper and After*, Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1982, reissued as *Anything Goes*, Paddington, NSW: Macleay Press, 1998, and as *Scientific Irrationalism*, New Brunswick, NJ and London: Transaction Publishers, 2001; *The Rationality of Induction*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986; *The Plato Cult and Other Philosophical Follies*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991; *Cricket versus Republicanism and Other Essays*, edited by James Franklin and R.J. Stove, Sydney: Quakers Hill Press, 1995; *Darwinian Fairytale*, Aldershot, UK: Avebury, 1995; and *Against the Idols of the Age*, edited by Roger Kimball, New Brunswick, NJ and London: Transaction Publishers, 1999.
 9. David Stove, "Cole Porter and Karl Popper: The Jazz Age in the Philosophy of Science," *Against the Idols of the Age*, New Brunswick, NJ and London: Transaction Publishers, 2000, pp. 3-4.
 10. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
 11. David Stove, "A Farewell to Arts: Marxism, Semiotics and Feminism," *Quadrant*, May 1986, p. 8.
 12. David Stove, "Did Babeuf Deserve the Guillotine?," this volume, p. 5.
 13. Roger Kimball, "Who was David Stove?," in David Stove, *Against the Idols of the Age*, New Brunswick, NJ and London: Transaction Publishers, 2000, p. xvii.
 14. David Stove, "Population, Privilege, and Malthus' Retreat," this volume, p. 87.
 15. *Ibid.*
 16. David Stove, "A Horse in the Bathroom or the Struggle for Life," *Darwinian Fairytale*, Aldershot, UK: Avebury, 1995, p. 53.
 17. David Stove, unpublished letter to Guy Richards, 06 May 1990.
 18. David Stove, unpublished letter to Guy Richards, 09 May 1990.
 19. David Stove, "Why You should be a Conservative," this volume, p. 172.
 20. David Stove, unpublished letter to Guy Richards, 06 August 1990.
 21. David Stove, unpublished letter to Guy Richards, 27 April 1992.

22. This was a task for which Stove believed philosophy to be especially well suited. For example, see David Stove, "Why Have Philosophers?," *Cricket versus Republicanism*, Sydney: Quakers Hill Press, 1995, pp. 63-65.
23. Peter Coleman, 11 September 1984, *Australian House of Representatives Hansard*, p. 1048.
24. S.M. Ryan, 12 September 1984, *Australian Senate Hansard*, p. 886.
25. David Stove, "Universities and Feminists Once More," *Quadrant*, November 1984, pp. 60-61.
26. Kimball, "Who was David Stove?," p. xx.
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31. Anatole France, *Le Lys Rouge*, Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1894, p. 118.
32. David Stove, unpublished letter to Guy Richards, 06 May 1990. Stove's reference is of course to the revolution at Versailles which is generally dated from May 5 to October 15, 1789. Important landmarks included the Fall of the Bastille on July 14, the Formal Abolition of Feudalism on August 4, and the August drafting of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man*.
33. David Stove, "What is Wrong with Our Thoughts?," in *The Plato Cult and Other Philosophical Follies*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991, p. 184.
34. John Maynard Keynes, *Essays and Sketches in Biography* (1951), New York: Meridian Books, 1956, p. 253.
35. Ibid.
36. David Stove, "The Columbus Argument," this volume, p. 151.
37. David Stove, "Why You should be a Conservative," this volume, p. 171.
38. Ibid., p. 174.
39. Ibid., pp. 174-175.
40. David Stove, "The Diabolical Place: A Secret of the Enlightenment," this volume, p. 106.
41. David Stove, "A Promise Kept by Accident," this volume, p. 29.
42. David Stove, "The Diabolical Place: A Secret of the Enlightenment," this volume, p. 107.
43. David Stove, unpublished letter to Andrew Irvine, 30 December 1991.
44. David Stove, "Did Babeuf Deserve the Guillotine?," this volume, p. 25. (Compare David Stove, "The End of History: A Response to Francis Fukuyama," *Cricket versus Republicanism and Other Essays*, edited by James Franklin and R.J. Stove, Sydney: Quakers Hill Press, 1995, pp. 55-57.)
45. Ibid., pp. 24-25.
46. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787), edited by William Peden, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1954, p. 159.
47. David Stove, "Paralytic Epistemology, or the Soundless Scream," this volume, p. 142.
48. David Stove, "The Subjection of John Stuart Mill," *Philosophy*, 68 (1993), p. 11.
49. Ibid., pp. 11-12.
50. Peter Coleman, "Not of Our Time," in David Stove, *Cricket versus Republicanism and other Essays*, Sydney: Quakers Hill Press, 1995, p. vii.

Acknowledgements

In preparing this book for publication I have become indebted to many people, but most especially to James Franklin of the University of New South Wales. Not only am I grateful to him for allowing me to reprint many of David Stove's essays whose rights he controls, I am also grateful to him for his many hours of editorial advice and assistance. Stove clearly chose well in selecting Franklin as his literary executor.

I would also like to record publicly the debt that readers owe to Irving Louis Horowitz, chairman of the board of Transaction Publishers at Rutgers University. At a time when few university presses are willing to publish material outside the political mainstream, Horowitz remains willing to consider manuscripts on their merits. Years ago, after I wrote to Stove about the difficulty of finding a publisher for material that was critical of then-current political views, Stove wrote back saying that to do so "would require an editor with, say, one-thousandth part of the courage of a Solzhenitsyn: and where in North America is such an editor to be found?"¹ It turns out that such an editor is to be found in the person of Irving Louis Horowitz.

I am also grateful to Roger Kimball for his many assistances, to Guy Richards for generously sharing his David Stove correspondence with me, to Bryn Dharmaratne and Carola Ellis for their valuable office skills, to Mary Curtis, Laurence Mintz and others at Transaction Publishers for expertly seeing this volume through to publication, and to David Armstrong, John Bacon, Scott Campbell, Susan Haack, Graeme Hunter, Joan Irvine, Paul Marantz, John Russell, Patrick Rysiew, Judy Stove, Robert Stove and Susan Tridgell for their many hours of helpful advice and assistance.

Finally, I am especially grateful to the Earhart Foundation in Ann Arbor, Michigan and the Australian High Commission in Ottawa, Ontario for their generous financial assistance. Without this assis-

tance, it is unlikely that this collection of essays could ever have appeared.

For those interested in the sources of the quotations found at the beginning of each of the three main sections of this collection, they are as follows: the quotation which begins "It was always obvious ..." appeared originally in "The Diabolical Place: A Secret of the Enlightenment," *Encounter*, May 1990, p. 9 and is reprinted in chapter 6 of this collection; the quotation which begins "Defects of empirical knowledge ..." appeared originally in "What is Wrong with Our Thoughts? A Neo-Positivist Credo," *The Plato Cult and Other Philosophical Follies*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1991, p.188; and the quotation which begins "I cannot help feeling ..." appeared originally in the same article, pp. 201-202. All three appear with permission.

I also gratefully acknowledge the permission of James Franklin and the David Stove Estate to reprint "The Diabolical Place: A Secret of the Enlightenment," which appeared originally in *Encounter*, May 1990, pp. 9-15, "Glimpses of Pioneer Life," which appeared originally under the title "O Pioneers! ..." in *Encounter*, June 1990, pp. 38-40, "Jobs for the Girls," which appeared originally in *Quadrant*, May 1985, pp. 34-35, and "Why You should be a Conservative," which appeared originally in the *Proceedings of the Russellian Society* (Sydney University), vol. 13 (1988), pp. 1-13.

In addition, I gratefully acknowledge the permission of Judith Stove and Ashgate Publishing to reprint "Population, Privilege, and Malthus' Retreat," which appeared originally as Essay IV in *Darwinian Fairytales*, Aldershot, UK: Avebury, 1995, pp. 39-52; the permission of Elsevier Science to reprint "Paralytic Epistemology, or the Soundless Scream," which appeared originally in *New Ideas in Psychology*, vol. 2 (1984), pp. 21-24; the permission of the *American Scholar* to reprint "Bombs Away," which appeared originally in *American Scholar*, vol. 56, no. 1 (Winter 1987), pp. 148-150; and the permission of *Commentary* magazine to reprint both "The Columbus Argument," which appeared originally in *Commentary*, vol. 84, no. 6 (December 1987), 57-58, and "Righting Wrongs," which appeared originally in *Commentary*, vol. 85, no. 1 (January 1988), 57-59.

Editing papers for posthumous publication presents its own set of challenges. Chief among these is the challenge of deciding why previously unpublished material has remained unpublished. Is it sim-

ply because, at the time of the author's death, no suitable publisher had yet been found? Or is it that the author had not yet revised the material to his own satisfaction, in which case it may not be worthy of publication? In the current case, this problem is greatly diminished by access to parts of Stove's correspondence and, once again, by the knowledge of his literary executor. As a result, it is a genuine pleasure to be able to bring five of Stove's essays into print for the first time. These are "Did Babeuf Deserve the Guillotine?" (1990), "A Promise Kept by Accident" (1991), "The Bateson Fact, or One in a Million" (1990), "The Malthus Check" (1990), and "Altruism and Darwinism" (1991), all of which are appearing courtesy of James Franklin and the David Stove Estate.

In order to clarify the author's intent in several essays which had not received final proof-reading at the time of Stove's death, a few passages have been slightly altered with regard to style. In none of these cases has the substance of Stove's argument been changed. In addition, a few of the essays printed in this collection have been slightly abridged, usually in order to avoid repetition with material contained in other chapters. Several titles have also been shortened, although the article previously published under the title "O Pioneers! ..." appears here under its original, slightly longer title, "Glimpses of Pioneer Life," since this is the title the author preferred. Finally, I have taken the liberty of standardizing the referencing format used throughout these essays. Even with these changes, the editing has been slight, slighter in fact than other editorial changes to which Stove gave consent during his lifetime. Once again, I am grateful to James Franklin for his assistance on these matters. I hope that the result is a collection of essays that not only meets the approval of readers, but that would have met the approval of its author as well.

Andrew Irvine
Farry Creek, British Columbia
May, 2002

Note

1. David Stove, unpublished letter to Andrew Irvine, 30 December 1991.

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Part I

So You Think You're an Egalitarian?

*“It was always obvious enough what the main axioms of the Enlightenment were.
They were secularism, egalitarianism, and the utilitarian axiom, that the
test of morality is the greatest happiness of the greatest number.”*

—David Stove, “The Diabolical Place: A Secret of the Enlightenment” (1990)

1

Did Babeuf Deserve the Guillotine?

Are you an opponent of privilege? It is ten thousand to one you are. In that case you are, though you may not know it, an opponent of learning too. The reason is simple: leisure, quiet, and access to the learning of others are privileges, and they are also three things without which learning cannot exist.

No two of those three will do on their own. Leisure and quiet will not save learning if the learning of others is not also accessible to you—in short, if there are no libraries. If you have libraries and the leisure to use them, but every moment of waking life is filled with loud noise from Red Guards, rock music, or some other source, the libraries and leisure might as well not exist as far as learning is concerned. If you have the libraries and the quiet which learning requires, but no one has enough leisure to profit from them, then learning will be extinguished just as surely as if you simply shot every educated person in the head, Khmer-Rouge style.

So, if all privilege is abolished, learning is abolished with it. A society in which privilege exists may be a barbarously ignorant one; we all know many instances of that. But a society *must* be barbarously ignorant if there is no privilege in it at all, only equality all round.

Are you inclined to dismiss this proposition as belonging to the age of illuminated manuscripts? You should not, because it remains equally true in the age of word-processors. It is also true of every branch of learning indifferently: physics, history, philosophy, mathematics, or whatever. A life largely devoted to any of these things need not be privileged with respect to wealth or power, but it *must* be privileged with respect to leisure, libraries, and quiet. This is sim-

ply a fact about *Homo sapiens*. It may be otherwise with some other species on another planet; but it is not otherwise with us.

“The presence of a body of well-instructed men, who have not to labour for their daily bread, is important to a degree which cannot be overestimated, as all high intellectual work is carried on by them, and on such work, material progress of all kinds depends, not to mention other and higher advantages.” That is true. The writer was Charles Darwin.¹

As I said a moment ago, learned people need not be economically privileged *themselves*. But Darwin’s words about “daily bread” may serve to remind us that the leisure needed for learning does depend upon *someone’s* being economically privileged. The someone might be, for example, the parents of the learned person, or some more distant relative. That is the most natural case, and historically has been the commonest one.

But there is, or at least there was for a thousand years before the present century, another way in which the wealth of other people could pay for the leisure which learning requires: patronage. A promising child of poor parents would be drawn to the attention of a neighboring gentleman, clergyman, or nobleman, who would provide the child with opportunities for education which his parents’ circumstances would never have permitted. The system of private patronage is by now long dead, of course; it is one of the countless victims of Enlightenment egalitarianism. Yet it is quite certain that it was infinitely less wasteful than the universal public patronage of education at the present day, as well as being far more accurate in selecting people capable of benefiting from education.

Intellectual culture depends for its existence, then, on economic privilege. Yet Marx said that in the coming classless society, where there would be no economic privilege, there would be no loss to culture, but in fact all gain. *True* culture, he said, (like *true* humanity), would exist for the first time when every privilege dividing one human being from another had at last been swept away. And *then* culture would flourish as never before: *everyone* would be a thinker, as well as an artist, a citizen and a worker.

This is ridiculous. It is entirely out of the question for everyone to be a thinker. (At least, it is, until there is a universal program of eugenics or of genetic engineering.) Most people do not have the capacity to be thinkers, even if they wanted to be; and, besides, they

do not want to be. As to incapacity, ask anyone who has taught in a Western university in recent decades. (In some intellectually demanding area, I mean, not in sheltered workshops like feminism.) They will tell you that most of the undergraduates are simply out of their depth and ought not to be in university. Yet these students are drawn from the brightest ten percent of the population.

But the other reason I gave is equally important: the weakness or absence, in most people, of any *passion* for thought and learning. Most people find their own lives quite interesting enough, in fact painfully interesting, without putting themselves to the pains which are inseparable from getting *entrée* into physics or philosophy or philology. To sit quietly alone for hours, thinking about some difficult question, in which you yourself have nothing to gain or lose—this is how some of us spend much of our lives, but to most people it is a purgatorial prospect. Noise, company, joint occupation, the excitements of war or power or money or sex or sport: these are the things which make up most people's idea of time well spent.

But in most people there is not merely an absence of studious inclinations: there is a positive aversion to studious people. This aversion is at some periods overt, at other periods covert, but it never dies out entirely. Its roots undoubtedly lie, as Hazlitt said in his essay on "The Disadvantages of Intellectual Superiority" (1822), in fear: the immemorial fear of "cunning men." It is painful to recall that when Socrates was still interested in astronomy and meteorology, even his friend Aristophanes could not resist currying favor with the Athenian voters by ridiculing such inquiries. Jack Cade, in Shakespeare's *Henry VI*, has a clerk put to death for associating with people who use such disgusting words as "noun" and "verb." The revolutionary judge who sent Lavoisier to the guillotine in 1794 remarked with satisfaction that "The Republic has no need of chemists." Pol Pot was even more thorough than his teachers, Lenin, Marx, and Ho Chi Minh; under him, even an educated accent, or merely wearing spectacles, was a sufficient death-warrant.

History is full of scenes of studious people feeling the effects of this aversion which the non-studious have towards them. The mathematician-theologian Hypatia was butchered by a mob of Christian monks in fourth-century Alexandria; famous monastic libraries in England were burnt by Danish raiders in the ninth century; professors were hounded to death by Red Guards during the "Great Proletarian

Cultural Revolution”; in our own universities twenty years ago, learning and teaching were disrupted, and professors intimidated, by chanting mobs of “anti-Vietnam” demonstrators; and so on. Now ask yourself: in all such cases, which side is more representative of ordinary humanity? Which side, the studious or their tormentors, stands for inclinations that are widespread, strong and steady in human beings, and which stands for inclinations that are rare or weak or intermittent? The question will answer itself.

To make matters worse, the passion for equality has a curious feature which de Tocqueville pointed out: that the more it is fed, the less it is satisfied. As more and more inequalities are removed, the more galling are any remaining ones felt to be. A tiny inequality, at a time when privilege has almost entirely vanished, excites more indignation than far greater inequalities had done at any earlier stage. This is evidently a morbid kind of passion: healthy passions do not work like that at all. A starving man, if he is given a good meal, is not more interested in breadcrumbs at the end of it, than he was in the steak at the start. But that is how it is with the hunger for equality.

The result, as far as learning is concerned, is that the privileges of the learned become more obnoxious to egalitarian sentiment as they become fewer and smaller; and since the learned are not exempt from egalitarian fever, but on the contrary are often its most active fomenters, those privileges become more obnoxious even to the learned themselves.

Take, for example, the matter of private libraries. In 1789 there were splendid private libraries all over Europe, and popular indignation against anyone who possessed such a thing was only in its embryonic stage. By 1889 almost every one of these libraries had been dispersed by taxation: taxation, the direction and the severity of which had the approval of almost every voter. By 1989 there was no such thing, in private hands, as a library worth mentioning.

Men who are rich enough never to need paid employment, and who devote their lives to learning—men like Charles Darwin, the physicist Henry Cavendish, or the chemist Robert Boyle—simply do not exist now. Re-distributive taxation has wiped them out. There are plenty of rich men still, but no learned ones: they may collect nineteenth-century buttons, or twentieth-century paintings, or something else equally valuable, but they do not collect books. Learning is now confined to the salaried employees of universities and similar institutions, and these people have only tiny libraries of their own.

Even if, *per impossible*, a present-day professor did come into possession of a large library, he could not afford to house it or preserve it. But even more importantly than that, it would be sure to weigh on his conscience like an Alp, as being an affront to “the starving millions,” “the underprivileged,” “the wretched of the earth,” or whatever the current catch-phrase of egalitarian rhetoric is. A large private library, in short, is now psychologically, as well as economically, impossible.

* * *

So far I have spoken only of *learning* and equality; yet there is obviously more to culture than learning. Not all culture is intellectual culture, by a long way. Good music, or a poem, or a painting, is a very different kind of thing from a contribution to science, philosophy, or history. Such things appeal to widely different parts of our minds. Indeed when you listen to music, for example, you seem to be almost a different person from the one you are when, say, you read some science. As a result, we easily come to think that art and knowledge are entirely unrelated things, or even antagonistic ones.

But they are not so, and the mistake comes from considering the different branches of culture only from the receiver’s or consumer’s end. To dispel the mistake, it is sufficient to consider culture from the giver’s or producer’s end instead. *There* we find that knowledge and art are as closely and solidly connected with each other as the trunk of a tree is with its flowers and fruit. Of course, knowledge will never *make* a good poet, or composer, or painter, any more than the trunk of a tree will itself bear flowers and fruit. But it is equally out of the question for a good poet, composer, or painter to be a very ignorant person, or even a stupid one.

Literature is evidently an intermediate case between the most intellectual and the least intellectual branches of culture: between science, philosophy, history, etc., on the one side, and music and painting, etc., on the other. As a result we are constantly perplexed, if we think of literature only from the consumer’s point of view, by unclassifiable cases. Darwin’s *Journal* of the voyage of the *Beagle*, for example: is that literature, or science, or history, or what? Boswell’s *Johnson*: is that literature, or history? Pepys’ *Diary*? There are countless valuable books which lie in this region, between pure

literature and some more severely intellectual discipline. But we need only consider these books from the *producer's* end, to see that they all have at least this much in common with a work of good science or history: that it took a strong and well-furnished intellect to produce them.

Was Henry James, perhaps, an ignorant or stupid person? Was Tennyson, or George Eliot, or Coleridge, or Jane Austen, or Fielding, or Pope, or Milton, or Shakespeare, or Chaucer? To ask these questions is to answer them. All great writers are people of strong intellects and wide knowledge. But it would be absurd to set this down as mere historical fact: it is something which *must* be so. It is not merely false but impossible that, for example, Robert Burns should have been the "ignorant plough-man" that it has often been said he was. An ignorant plough-man could not even write in Burns' time. And how many people, at any time, among those who can write, are capable of writing ten words, let alone ten pages, that other people find worth reading?

Musical composition and painting are, as I said, further removed than literature is from the more severely intellectual branches of culture. But even they can be produced only where a solid mass of knowledge is in place to support them. It is easier for a good composer or painter to be comparatively ignorant or stupid than it is for a good poet or novelist to be so, but there are two matters, each of them a large one in itself, which any good composer or painter *must* know a lot about. One of these is the materials—sounds and colors respectively—in which he works: what possibilities are inherent in them, and what their limitations are. The other is what has been done by others before him, in music or painting. And given the size and complexity of each of these matters, someone who knows a lot about both cannot possibly be very ignorant or stupid.

Until the present century, it was never necessary for anyone to say what I have said in the four preceding paragraphs. It had simply, and rightly, never occurred to anyone that a good poet, composer, or painter, could *fail* to belong to some species or other of the genus "learned person." It has been left to our century to discover that a good poem, painting, or piece of music, might be the production of any ignoramus, child, madman, savage, ape, computer, or merely of spilt paint or ink. Previously, the education of a painter or composer was always recognized as being the important matter which it is. It is

a very different thing *now*, of course, what the “education” of painters and composers is. It is a pleasure to be ignorant of the details of these gruesome farces. All we need to know about them, we can easily infer from their end-products.

In reality, then, art and knowledge are by no means such independent things, and still less are they antagonistic ones, as we are apt to suppose. *All* culture, at its roots in the minds of the people who make it, is to a greater or lesser extent *intellectual* culture. As a result, most of what I said above, about learning and equality, holds equally good for culture and equality.

Not quite all of it does. Composers or painters are not objects of suspicion *ex officio*, as a merely learned person is. No doubt the reason is that they give more pleasure to more people than he does, and pleasure of a more sensory kind. But all the rest of what I said *does* hold good for culture in general.

The leisure, quiet, and libraries which learning requires are equally required by composers and painters, though the latter need, in addition, access to musical performances, art galleries, and so on. Again, composers or painters need not be economically privileged themselves, but the leisure which they need is absolutely dependent on there being economic privilege *somewhere* in the society around them. Finally, it is as ridiculous to imagine *everyone* being a composer or painter, as it is to imagine everyone being a thinker. Most people are without any passion that inclines them that way, and also without the knowledge which, supposing they had the passion, would be needed to give it concrete expression.

* * *

The extinction of “bourgeois culture” which Marx looked forward to with relish, and which his followers have carried out to the best of their ability, is a more serious matter than the phrase suggests. The reason is that the extinction of bourgeois culture is the extinction of culture, for there is no other kind.

Take any branch of culture you like: literature, science, philosophy, history, music, or whatever. It comes neither from the most privileged part of society, nor from the least; neither from the blue-bloods, nor from the “people of the abyss” (as Jack London called them). It comes from the great broad band in between.

It is very obvious why the people of the abyss play no part in culture. They are too tired, or too hungry, or too sick, or too drunk, to acquire even elementary education. And no one can contribute to physics, philosophy, music, or whatever, unless they have, not merely elementary education, but (as I implied before) a good grasp of what others have done before them in that field. Which in turn requires leisure, quiet, and libraries.

Of course there have been many remarkable instances of people overcoming early social disadvantages. Such instances formed the subject-matter of a large literature in the 19th-century. G.L. Craik's *The Pursuit of Knowledge under Difficulties* (1830) is only one of many similar books, and worthwhile books they are too. The most staggering case I know of is that of Thomas Edward, who is the subject of Samuel Smiles' *Life of a Scotch Naturalist* (1876). From his infancy, Edward was an uncontrollable collector of wildlife, and several schools expelled him before he went, with great relief, into factory-work at the age of six. Almost all his long life was passed in extreme poverty, working as a shoemaker; yet he made some mark as a naturalist. I wish I could compel our philosophers of science, our "educationists," and our students, to reflect on a life like this one. But such lives are necessarily rare: they call for a degree of single-mindedness which amounts, as Edward's did, almost to madness. It is much rarer still, of course, for anyone who started as far down the social scale as he did, to rise to the very *top* of any field of culture. Winckelman did, but I do not know of any other instance; and then, he may almost be said to have brought his own branch of history into existence.

But the aristocracy is almost as weakly represented in culture as the opposite social extreme is. King Henry the Eighth wrote a book (defending the Pope against Luther) and of course James the First was an inveterate scribbler. In Victorian times, books of selections from "royal and noble authors" enjoyed wide popularity; or at any rate, wide sales, since no doubt they were much more often bought than read. Few who did read them would have had their respect for the royal and noble much increased by the experience.

If you took all the blue-bloods out of English literature or historiography, whom would you lose that matters? Byron; but no one else that I know of. If you took them out of English physics and chemis-

try, whom would you lose? Only one, I think; Henry Cavendish, whom I mentioned before, after whom the famous Cambridge physics laboratory is named and who was a brother of the third Duke of Devonshire. In the history of mathematics and again in the history of music, there is not one major figure, as far as I know, who was of very high birth. The history of philosophy is only a little more fertile in aristocrats. There is Plato and there is Russell; two striking exceptions, no doubt, but even more strikingly few. Apart from them, the only aristocrat who merits a place in the history of philosophy (as far as I know) is the third Earl of Shaftesbury, and his place is a very minor one.

One can to some extent see why this should be so. An aristocrat is someone with more opportunity than other people to indulge his or her mere *will*. Most people, if given that opportunity, will flow into the typical aristocratic activities—war, government, conspicuous display, hunting and related sports—as inevitably as water flows downhill. In culture, on the other hand, or at least intellectual culture, your mere will counts for nothing. There, the only question is, not who you are, or how you would prefer things, but what you can do. In science or philosophy or history, the only standards are entirely impersonal. Is it true? Is it new? Is it proved? Is it probable? These standards are anti-aristocratic by their very nature: you cannot submit to them *and* lord it over others too. Those old expressions, “the republic of letters” and the “commonwealth of learning,” had a profound truth in them.

Of course I do not suggest that the will is mortified in scientists, philosophers or historians, or even that they are exempt from the desire to trample rivals down. It should go without saying that human vanity never sleeps, and will find outlets for itself anywhere. Even in the purest of pure mathematics, no doubt, X’s proof of theorem T is a mortification to X’s critic Y, and is valued by X all the more on that account. This is simply human nature. Yet it remains true that in mathematics, or in any other field of intellectual culture, no one’s *mere* will counts for anything; while it may count for much, or everything, elsewhere.

The case is very little different even in literature. There, “pulling rank” *can* get you a certain distance, as the case of Byron proves. But it never gets you very far or for very long; unless, indeed, you happen to possess Byron’s genius as well.

But whatever may be the reason for it, the *fact* is that if you write down the names of a hundred people who have done something that matters in science or literature or any other branch of culture, you will find that two at most of the hundred come from the most privileged part of the social scale, and one at most from the least privileged. In other words at least ninety-seven of them came from backgrounds which are bounded, on one side, by the gentry and minor nobility and, on the other side, by shoemakers and weavers. Their fathers and their grandfathers were teachers or scholars or clerks or clergymen or farmers or doctors or lawyers or soldiers or sailors or bankers or merchants or tradesmen or craftsmen or shopkeepers. At any rate, they were people who possessed some social advantages but were very far from possessing all.

This is an extremely simple statistic, and one which is very easily verified: anyone who is prepared to take a small amount of trouble can satisfy themselves as to the fact. Yet it is of the greatest importance. If it were attended to, it would be enough on its own to silence forever revolutionary or bohemian ranting about “bourgeois culture”; for it proves that culture is everywhere, and always has been, a middle-class monopoly.

* * *

Most of the elements of the Enlightenment can be traced back to classical antiquity, but its egalitarianism cannot. That everyone ought to be equal is a moral idea which simply never occurred to anyone in antiquity; not even to the most wide-ranging thinkers, such as Plato or Aristotle. Still less did the ideal of equality ever play any part in *practical* politics. There was indeed a widespread mythology of a Golden Age in the past, when there had been no conflict, no inequality, no private property, and no work; the earth spontaneously supplied food to all. But no one ever proposed a *restoration* of equality, or of any other feature of the Golden Age.

This is a fact about the ancient world which is extremely difficult for us to accept. In us, the idea that everyone should be equal is so deeply ingrained that we think everyone must always have been of the same opinion. Hence, for example, we assume that the slave-revolts and slave-wars, which punctuated Greek and Roman history, were attempts, however abortive, to abolish slavery. Spartacus,

the most successful of the slave-generals, we imagine to have been an early Trotsky. Rosa Luxemburg, accordingly, named her communist organization of seventy years ago, "The Spartakist League."

But this is a complete delusion, brought about by the Enlightened historiography of the last three hundred years. The slave-revolts and slave-wars of antiquity were attempts to *escape from* slavery, not to abolish it. An army gathered around Spartacus, and then wandered around Italy and defeated several Roman armies sent against it. But Spartacus's main object, all along, was simply to get back home to Thrace. He never got there but, if he had, he would undoubtedly have been, like any other person of substance, a slave-owner himself; and not one of the more indulgent ones either, to judge by the way in which ex-slaves have generally treated their own slaves.

No one in antiquity ever proposed the abolition of slavery. Moreover, it is the height of folly to think that anyone *should* have proposed its abolition. You might just as sensibly think that people should now propose the abolition of electrical power and the petrol-engine. There was simply no other economic form which civilization could then take. Of course, there were peoples, and were known to be peoples, among whom the institution of slavery did not exist; but they were not civilized peoples. *Their* prisoners-of-war were simply killed and, among certain tribes, eaten.

It is equally foolish to be horrified by the ferocity with which the army of Spartacus, when it was finally overcome, was treated. Survivors of this army, wherever they could be found, were crucified and left hanging by the roadside. We turn aside from reading this with disgust and amazement. Yet consider: the triumph of the slaves would have meant slavery or death to every free Roman man, woman and child, and everyone knew this. Where such issues are at stake, it is absolutely inevitable, given the nature of human beings, that exemplary ferocity be displayed after victory. This is true, whichever side the victory falls to.

But was not the famous campaign waged by the Gracchus brothers, in late Republican Rome, a campaign against privilege? Well, all Enlightened historians say so, of course, and the statement is not totally misleading. It is true, for example, that Tiberius Gracchus, until his assassination, had an adviser who was the nearest thing to an egalitarian that antiquity produced. This was a certain Blossius, a Stoic philosopher, who went on to attach himself to Aristonicus of

Pergamum, because that ruler's resistance to Rome was tinged with egalitarian aspirations. But the fact is that general ideas of any kind played extremely little part in the politics of the late Republic, and the idea of equality least of all. No influence could have made doctrinaire egalitarians out of the Gracchus brothers, any more than any influence could have made doctrinaire egalitarians out of the Kennedy brothers in recent American history. To believe otherwise is to be deceived by the Enlightenment's re-writing of Roman history to suit its own ends.

As an actual force in history, the ideal of equality has its roots in Christian, not in classic, ground. There are plenty of passages in the Bible, of course, and especially in the New Testament, which point clearly to equality, and even to communism, as Christian ideals. There are plenty of similar passages in some of the early Fathers too. In fact, Christianity has always carried communism as a kind of "spare wheel," though, like all spare wheels, it is forgotten most of the time. For example, no one seems to remember that the blessed martyr St. Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) is a communist tract. Again, it is forgotten that the most successful of the nineteenth-century American communist societies, such as the Perfectionists and the Shakers, were Christian ones. And so on.

But it had always been equally easy, of course, to assemble other Biblical passages which point, equally clearly, in the very opposite direction; in the direction of submission to authority and acceptance of inequalities. And it was on this side that the whole weight of the organized church fell for a thousand years after Constantine adopted Christianity as the religion of the Roman Empire. Western Christendom, even more than Eastern, was essentially hierarchical, in every secular sphere as well as in every sacred one.

As a result, the seeds of egalitarianism were extremely slow in coming to fruition, even in Christian soil: they lay virtually dormant from 300 to 1300 A.D. But there had always been—and there always is—a certain number of people of the kind who, in Australia, are called "bush lawyers." Many of these people, in reading their Bibles, had made the amazing discovery that neither kings nor dukes nor bankers, neither bishops nor tithes, are things instituted by Christ. And the number of such people increased enormously with the spread of literacy, the translation of the Bible into vulgar tongues, and the invention of printing.

Accordingly, egalitarian outbreaks began to occur as the late-medieval world shaded into the modern one, and they became increasingly common and increasingly formidable. In the fourteenth century there were peasant revolts in France, Flanders, and England; in the fifteenth, there was the Taborite convulsion in Bohemia, and Jack Cade's revolt in England; sixteenth-century Germany saw the Peasants' War and the Anabaptist insurrection; and seventeenth-century England witnessed the movements of the Ranters, the Diggers, and the Levellers.² These were increasingly explicit assaults on *all* privilege, and they all had an explicitly Biblical base. They were also, of course, all finally repressed; but only, except in Britain, with increasing difficulty and effusion of blood.

Most truly is it said, however, that the blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church. From every setback it received, the enthusiasm for equality arose with ten times the energy, and ten times the number of converts, than it had had before. The pressure on privilege of every kind inexorably increased: and then, after about 1750, the Enlightenment turned its attention, as Burke wrote at the time, from "the destruction of religion [to] the subversion of government." The effects were so unmistakable that soon everyone knew that the air was full of lightning. The storm broke with unprecedented fury over France in 1789, and privilege, whether aristocratic, ecclesiastical or economic, suffered a blow from which it has never recovered. This was the beginning of the revolutionary era in which we still live.

In fact, of course, the French Revolution stopped very far short of extinguishing all inequalities. It even made certain economic inequalities more marked, or at least made them more obvious, by removing the veil of moral authority which had previously softened their outlines. Yet some people—the communists—held that economic inequality was the source of all other inequalities.

* * *

François Babeuf, born in 1760, was one of these. He had undergone, as many others had, an egalitarian revelation. Just as English Puritans at the time of the Commonwealth had often changed their names, say, from John Doe to "Kill-Sin" Doe or "Praise-God" Doe in order to signal their born-again status, so French Revolutionaries, in order to signal their revival of ancient Republican virtue, often

changed their names to Roman ones. New Catos, Scipios, etc., came up like mushrooms, and Babeuf became Gracchus Babeuf. The Revolution had stopped inexcusably short of abolishing inequality, he said, because it had not abolished private property. To take that last but most essential step, and to install the reign of universal equality forever, Babeuf and a few friends secretly formed what they called "The Conspiracy of the Equals." But they were arrested and tried, and guillotined in 1797.

As well we might hope to kill the Hydra by cutting off a head or two! No martyr to equality has ever had more fertile blood than Babeuf. Fifty years after his death, he found a potent reincarnation in Karl Marx: there is not a word in the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848 that might not have been dictated by the spirit of Babeuf. That pamphlet said, indeed, that "the spectre haunting Europe" was communism, and Babeuf could have pointed out to Marx that that was not *exactly* right. Even with communists, community of property is not an *axiom*: it is a theorem, *derived from* the moral axiom of equality. Still, this inexactitude did not matter. A spectre *was* haunting Europe, and a spectre of just as bloody and destructive an aspect as Marx, with relish, said that it was. The spectre was egalitarianism.

Any doubts which 1848 may have left, as to either the strength of the egalitarian fever, or its effects, were dispelled in 1871. The Paris Commune was the first large-scale realization of Babeuf's ideal. It was, of course, finally extinguished in its own blood. But that was not a one-millionth part of the blood which the Communards, for their part, were willing, or to tell the truth, fanatically eager, to shed in order to install equality everywhere.

The suppression of the Commune, like every earlier setback to the egalitarian spirit, left that spirit stronger and more widespread than it had ever been before. "Marxism" was its main new name, but Marxism is simply egalitarianism plus intellectual pretensions. The pretensions are entirely hollow, as was always obvious to any educated person not blinded by the passion for equality; but in any case they never mattered. It was the hunger for equality, at any cost whatever, and that hunger alone, which made Marxism formidable.

Lenin and Trotsky treated Marxist theory with the light-heartedness it deserves: repudiating a certain part of it when that suited them, reviving another part when *that* suited them, but mostly just forgetting all about it. They could not have done otherwise. Marxist theory

is far too general to be of any help in manipulating committees, shooting mutineers, or commanding an army, and not one day in the career of Lenin and Trotsky, if looked at from the point of view of Marxist theory, makes any sense at all. By contrast, they never wavered for one second in that devotion to the goal of equality which was their own and their movement's driving force. Looked at from *this* point of view, every day in their careers, indeed every hour, makes perfect sense.

The civil and international war in Russia, between 1917 and 1921, was a turning-point in European history for this reason: for the first time, the egalitarian side in a war *won*. This was an omen uniquely appalling; and ensuing events have fully lived up to what the omen portended.

The victorious communists embarked at once on a campaign against privilege: a campaign carried on not only in Russia, but all over the inhabited earth; a campaign against privilege of every kind whatever, conducted by whatever means—military, political, or (as they say) “educational”—were judged most appropriate. How much success this campaign has enjoyed, it cannot by now be necessary to state.

Nor can it be necessary to remind the reader that the success of this campaign has necessitated an altogether unprecedented amount of bloodshed, deportation, torture, arbitrary imprisonment, forced labor, starvation, and terror. Its cost to culture has been as great as its cost in blood, but here I will mention only the most dreadful aspect of this cost. This is that, while all culture, with no exception whatever, depends on preserving knowledge of the past, communist governments have turned all historians in their own countries, and many historians in the free countries, into mere machines for the manufacture of lies. And all of this has been done, for the sake of what? Why, yes—one had almost forgotten—for the sake of overthrowing privilege and establishing equality.

By now, no one is ignorant of these horrors, and everyone knows well enough that they were the result of the most determined effort ever made to give the world what it had yearned for so deeply and so long: equality. But has this knowledge done anything to *cool* the world's ardor for equality? No, nothing whatever, not anywhere, and least of all in the free countries. Quite the contrary in fact: exactly as in all the earlier cases, the more destructive egalitarianism

has shown itself to be, both of life and of culture, the stronger and more widespread has the passion for equality become.

I will give three illustrations of this fact, all drawn from the free countries in the last few decades. First, there has come into existence a term of bitter opprobrium which is entirely new: "élitism." Only one word, and yet, given the recency and the circumstances of its birth, what volumes its currency speaks! Second, the one feature of communist societies which *everyone* in the free countries now unites in detesting is their inequality, economic and other. Yet that is the *one* hopeful feature which they possess! Third, it is now assumed, more widely than ever before, that it is a duty of government to redress every under-privilege whatever; while at the same time, of course, in accordance with de Tocqueville's law, new forms of under-privilege are discovered, or invented, every day.

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It should go without saying that the egalitarians have not *succeeded* in creating a society of equals in any of the communist countries, or that neither we nor anyone else will ever succeed in doing so either. There cannot *be* such a thing; it is incompatible with human biology. In any society there will always be differences of age, of sex, of race, of health, of mental and physical endowments; and differences of any one of these kinds are sufficient on their own to put a society of equals entirely out of the question. The *combination* of all these kinds of differences, which is of course the actual case, makes egalitarianism an idea unworthy of an intelligent child of eight. And that is before we even take into account the inequalities which are imposed by the harsh necessity of feeding or clothing or housing a civilized society.

The ideal of equality is, in short, too silly to be worth talking about. But it is worthwhile to recall, as I have briefly done in the preceding section, the effects which are inseparable from any attempt to realize that ideal.

There is also another question worth talking about; what the *causes* of egalitarianism are. What are the psychological roots of the hunger for equality? They cannot be roots which are universal and irresistible in human beings; the counter-example of antiquity shows that. At the same time, they must be roots which go deep, and spread wide; medieval and modern history prove *that*. But what are they?

The obvious answer, and hence the answer which has most often been given, is this: envy, assisted by vanity and ambition. These are certainly things which, without being universal, go deep enough and are widespread enough to fill the bill, and I think that in fact this answer is not far wrong. But it cannot be the whole story, because many of the most fanatical egalitarians (Marx, Bakunin, and Lenin, for example) while possessing a full share of vanity and ambition, have been unusually free from envy.

If Lenin had been moved to any important extent by envy, then he might have been able to have been “bought off.” But no one who knew him ever imagined for one moment that there was any possibility of that. And there is no reason to suppose that the roots of Lenin’s egalitarianism were different from those of anyone else’s egalitarianism. I therefore believe that there must be a piece of this jigsaw puzzle which has so far been overlooked. What it is, the next two paragraphs will suggest.

Can you believe that it is an *accident* that the progress of egalitarianism, for the last two hundred years, has almost everywhere been a progress through deeper and ever-deeper oceans of blood? (Think of France in 1789 and 1871, Russia in 1917, China in 1948, South Vietnam in 1968, Cambodia in 1976, etc.) Again, can you believe that it is an accident that the quantity of blood spilt by egalitarian governments in our century dwarfs into insignificance all the blood ever spilt by clerical, aristocratic, or capitalist “reaction”? For my part, however hard I try, I cannot believe that either of these facts is accidental.

Now, I ask you, the reader, to perform a small experiment in introspection, if you are an egalitarian. First try to form a mental picture—any picture will do—of the happy future in which everyone is going to be equal. You find that “nothing comes to mind,” as they say? Don’t worry: everyone experiences the very same difficulty. But now try to form a mental picture of the *overthrow of privilege* which is, we all agree, a necessary preliminary to that future. Now the pictures come easily enough—don’t they?—and vivid ones at that. A hundred years ago they would have been pictures of bomb-throwing, hammers, sickles, and so on; but in your picture the technology will no doubt be more sophisticated, owing to the general progress of humanity. There is, however, one element in all these pictures which is invariant: namely, *suffering*

inflicted on some defender of established privilege, whether it be a policeman, soldier, head of state, priest, or whatever.

I suggest therefore, that the missing piece in the psychology of egalitarianism is bloodthirstiness. Marx, Bakunin, and Lenin made up for their deficiency in envy by an unusually strong appetite for people being killed.

Putting together all the accounts we have of these three men, their bloodthirsty breath is quite as unmistakable as garlic breath, though even less tolerable. How could it not have been? They knew perfectly well that an indefinite ocean of blood lay between them and their goal of equality; and it is agreed on all hands that this knowledge did not diminish, in the smallest imaginable degree, their enthusiasm for that goal. Now such knowledge, combined with such inflexible resolution, is a thing which *will show*, just as certainly as a recent garlic meal will show. And it did show in these men.

Are you perhaps so ignorant, or so infatuated with equality, as not to know that it showed? Then you may learn something from the following paragraph. It was written, it may be worthwhile to add, by a great scholar, a secularist, and an internationalist: Gilbert Murray.

I once in my youth met the celebrated Nihilist, Bakunin, the unsuccessful Lenin of his day, who was credited with the doctrine that every act of destruction or violence is good; because either it does good directly, by destroying a person or thing which is objectionable, or else it does good indirectly by making an already intolerable world worse than before, and so bringing the Social Revolution nearer. Since he and his followers had no constructive scheme for this so-called Social Revolution, the theory is for practical purposes indistinguishable from true Satanism or hatred of the world. One of the deductions made from it was that, in the ordinary workday business of political assassinations, it was far more desirable to murder innocent and even good persons than guilty or wicked ones. For two reasons; the wicked were of some use, if left alive, in furthering the Revolution, and, also, to kill the wicked implied no really valuable criticism of the existing social order. If you kill an unjust judge, you may be understood to mean merely that you think judges ought to be just. But if you go out of your way to kill a just judge, it is clear that you object to judges altogether. If a son kills a bad father, the act, though meritorious in its humble way, does not take us much further. But if he kills a good father, it cuts at the root of all that pestilent system of family affection and loving kindness and gratitude on which the present world is largely based.”³

Bakunin’s psychology is recognizably the same as that of the Baader-Meinhof group in Germany, Italy’s Red Guards, and countless similar organizations in our time. It is also recognizably the same as that of Marx: in high school he was nicknamed “Destroy” from the frequency of that word on his lips. It is the very same psychol-

ogy yet again, as any reader of Cohn's *Pursuit of the Millennium* (1957) can verify in endless detail, as that of the fifteenth-century Bohemian Taborites and the sixteenth-century German Anabaptists. It is the psychology of people who are, *by their own account*, heralds of a glorious tomorrow, but also are the *avenging angels* of today. And an avenging angel, without an appetite for blood, is a psychological impossibility.

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That equality is destructive of learning, and of culture generally, is one of the oldest objections to egalitarianism. It suggested itself from the start, because the early egalitarian movements consisted almost entirely of very ignorant people. The reason is obvious: it is among the poor that there must always be the most envy, and the poor, up to (say) 1600, were inevitably very ignorant and most of them illiterate. The leaders of the early egalitarian movements were sometimes learned people, and almost always were people at least touched by learning; but their followers were not.

Babeuf and other members of his conspiracy, therefore, would have been perfectly familiar with the criticism that equality is destructive of culture. They had an answer to it, which they had learnt from their idol, J.J. Rousseau, and which satisfied them entirely. This was that if equality is destructive of culture, then so much the worse for culture. Thus Sylvain Maréchal, one of the conspirators, wrote in his *Manifesto of the Equals* (1796): "Let the arts perish, if need be! But let us have real equality."⁴

The critics of Rousseau, in response to this, used to ask whether, even if the Republic had no need of chemists, poets, or historians, it did not have a need of competent architects, engineers, and farmers? But Rousseau had an answer to this too, and had taught it to his disciples. It was the same sort of answer as before. That is, if it is true that equality can be had only at the expense of good buildings, good bridges and roads, and good farming—why then, that is just too bad for all those things as well.

The critics then asked, very properly, what was "noble" about a solitary, naked, houseless savage, living in the forest on roots and grubs? But by this stage they had also realized that they were dealing with a mania, and they gave it up as a bad job. Even if they had

stayed for an answer, Rousseau had none to give. Nevertheless, it was Rousseau who remade Europe in 1789, and who was still, in 1797, remaking it through such disciples as Babeuf and Maréchal. His critics, on the other hand, having nothing but sanity and culture on their side, were as straw before the wind, and consequently have almost vanished from the memory of mankind.

This one-sided contest had been decided in favor of Rousseau and equality, then, long before the trial of Babeuf. By 1797, “Egalité” was one of three words engraved on the nation’s heart, and Babeuf’s defense in court was simply a set of variations on the theme of equality.

Socrates’ defense at his trial in 399 B.C. is extremely famous, and it deserves its fame. Babeuf’s defense is not as good as that, but it is immensely impressive all the same, and deserves to be far better-known than it is. What is impressive about it is its simple logicity. Babeuf, though his defense was very long and repetitive, had really only one point to make: a logical point, and a good one, though extremely simple.

No privilege is morally defensible: everyone ought to be equal. This is a premise with Babeuf. But no two men can be equal, he points out, if one of them has more property than the other. Hence everyone should always have equal property. The only way, however, to make property always equal, is to have all property held in common. So, if there is to be equality, there must be no private property.

This reasoning had no claim, of course, to being original. On the contrary, it was this simple but unanswerable argument which had been making egalitarians into communists ever since there *were* egalitarians. It is also this argument which, ever *since* Babeuf’s time, has carried nearly all the weight of the intellectual case for communism. This simple and beautiful argument was later buried, by a certain Dr. Marx, under a mountain of German philosophy, tendentious history, and pseudo-economics; but then, that is what is to be expected from a German Ph.D. in philosophy. But it was not Marx’s load of learned lumber, during the two hundred years since Babeuf’s trial, which has made the case for communism ever more difficult for most people to elude. It was the argument from the moral premise of equality.

Babeuf knew that, as far as logic went, he “had them on the hip”: prosecutor, judge and government. He tossed them mercilessly from

one horn of his dilemma to the other: “*either* deny equality, and admit that you are defenders of privilege, *or* admit that you ought to be communists.” I think he was emboldened by the conviction that he could not escape the death sentence in any case. But I hasten to do justice to the memory of an honest man by adding that I do not think that he would have spoken any differently even if he *had* thought he might get off.

His address to the court was, in essence, as follows: “Whence comes your authority over me? If it does not come from the principles of the Revolution, of which equality is one, then you have no authority at all, only arbitrary power. In that case you are no more than bloody tyrants, shameful regicides, usurpers of the most ancient and glorious of European monarchies. But if you possess your authority in virtue of the Revolution, then *your* authority rests on the same foundation as *my* reasoning. Reason tells us all that there can be no equality until there is community of property. Has Reason become a crime in France, less than ten years after you publicly announced that Reason is the God of the Republic? By arraigning me, you in effect arraign Rousseau, Mably, Diderot, and all the other great and good men who taught us all the supreme truth of equality, and who made that Revolution which is the only source of any legitimate authority which you possess.”

Winning arguments is never a way to win friends. It is so least of all where someone wins an argument by a wide margin, in public, on a subject of great importance. Socrates would almost certainly have not lost his life if he had not won the argument against his accusers; even as it was, the motion for the penalty of death was carried against him only by a tiny margin of votes. But Babeuf won *his* argument by a margin utterly humiliating to his accusers; he won “with daylight second,” as Australians say. There was therefore never any chance of his escaping the death penalty.

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I come at last to the question which is my title: did Babeuf *deserve* the guillotine? Should a man be killed for teaching that everyone ought to be equal, and for teaching propositions, such as communism, which logically follow from that one? Or rather, since the penalty of death is obviously not of the essence here, should governments proscribe the opinion that everyone ought to be equal?

All governments proscribe some opinions; though of course they need not do so by express interdiction. There are also certain opinions which all governments proscribe: for example, that arson is innocent, or that assassination of government officials is laudable. Further, those two opinions are ones which any government *ought to* proscribe. (This is a *premise* with me: anyone, if there is anyone, who denies it, is not among the people whom I expect, or hope, to influence.) So the question becomes, whether the opinion that everyone ought to be equal, is another one of the opinions which governments ought to proscribe.

Which opinions a government ought to proscribe obviously depends, in many cases, on existing circumstances. During a war, for example, or during a financial panic, or during a time of intense racial antagonism within a society, it may be a government's duty to proscribe certain opinions which, at other times, it ought to let alone. Equally obviously, there are certain opinions which ought to be proscribed at all times, such as the ones mentioned above about arson or assassination. Now, is the opinion that everyone ought to be equal, one which ought sometimes to be proscribed?

That the answer to this question is "yes" seems evident enough. Consider, for example, the situation of the Roman government around 73 B.C., when it was engaged in its life-and-death struggle against the slave-army of Spartacus. Should the government *then* have proscribed the opinion that everyone ought to be equal? In fact this question did not arise, because, as I said earlier, that opinion had never occurred to anyone. But suppose it had: suppose that this opinion had just lately begun to be voiced, by a philosopher and his students here, a religious crank there, a foreign resident in a third place. Would the government then have been justified in proscribing the opinion that everyone ought to be equal?

Of course. Indeed it would have been, in the circumstances, the height of folly to let that opinion go unchecked, since to do so could only have increased the likelihood that everyone in Italy, not already a slave, would be enslaved or killed. It would have been equally the height of folly for Spartacus to let the equality-opinion go unchecked in his army. Soldiers who believe that they have as much right to issue orders as any of their officers are a great deal worse than useless in a war. And then, as I indicated earlier, not one person on either side would have been able to support life for a fortnight after victory, if one of the results of victory had been the end of slave-labor.

Is the equality-opinion, then, one of those which ought to be proscribed at all times? I think it is, and my reasons are these: that the opinion, that everyone ought to be equal, leads, by logic which is clear to even the meanest intelligence, to the opinion that private property ought to be abolished; and that *that* opinion is, above all others, destructive both of life and of culture. Compared with the opinion that everyone ought to be equal, the opinion that arson is innocent, or that government officials ought to be shot, are minor moral eccentricities.

I realize, of course, the enormous difficulty, perhaps the impossibility, of *enforcing* a proscription of the equality opinion, now or in the foreseeable future. In addition, as I said earlier, the equality opinion is actually more widespread and intense now than it was at any earlier period. Let us suppose, then, that its proscription, however desirable, is impossible.

In that case, very far from communism being dead, as some foolish people at present believe, we can confidently look forward to bigger and better Marxes, Lenins, Stalins, Maos, Kim Il Sungs, Pol Pots, Ceausescus, Baader-Meinhofs, Shining Paths, and all the rest, with ever-increasing destruction both of life and of culture, down “to the last syllable of recorded time.”

Notes

1. Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871), second edition, London: John Murray, 1874, pp. 207-208.
2. All these things, as well as many similar ones, are surveyed in Norman Cohn's invaluable book, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, London: Secker and Warburg, 1957.
3. Gilbert Murray, *Humanist Essays*, London: Unwin Books, 1964, p. 195.
4. John A. Scott, *The Defense of Gracchus Babeuf*, New York: Schocken Books, 1972, p. 92.

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2

A Promise Kept by Accident

That ignorance is bliss, sometimes at least, is so obvious as to be proverbial. As the author of the book of *Ecclesiastes* said, “Who increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow,” and that too is obviously sometimes true. The history of science bears at least some resemblance to the ancient Greek fable of Pandora’s box.

Such thoughts as these, however, were anathema to the Enlightenment. One of its most representative books, Baron D’Holbach’s *The System of Nature* (1770), begins with the following declaration: “The source of man’s misery is his ignorance of nature”!¹ This astounding proposition is in fact the theme of the whole book, and D’Holbach shrinks from no extravagance in defending it. He says, for example, that “truth can never render you unhappy.”²

It is not easy to think of opinions more ridiculous than these. If your bank manager tells you something which makes you unhappy, are you therefore bound to conclude that what he told you was not true? Can a scientist comfort dying people by teaching them some biochemistry or astronomy? Were people in general made happier when Copernicus got the solar system basically right, or when Newton discovered universal gravitation?

The two statements I have quoted are in fact so very ridiculous that it is reasonable to suspect that D’Holbach did not quite mean what he said. And yet even what he said goes only a little way beyond the veriest commonplaces of the Enlightenment. All Enlightened people, at any time, must believe something *like* the proposition that human misery is due to ignorance. Otherwise, why their great enthusiasm for science and education, as remedies for the ills of life?

This essay was written in 1991.—Ed.

Around 1600, when Francis Bacon said that knowledge is power, he was almost alone in thinking so. But he was also one of the heroes of all Enlightened people in the eighteenth century, and by the middle of that century this thought had become the very commonest of all Enlightenment commonplaces. As well as being a movement for the dissolution of religion and monarchy, the Enlightenment was a "Society for the Promotion of Useful Knowledge." That is why its most characteristic literary production was the gigantic *Encyclopaedia* of 1751, which described and illustrated every branch of science, industry, agriculture, craft and trade then existing in France. This book seems to us now an improbable one for a Diderot or a d'Alembert to have devoted years of his life to: a philosopher or a mathematician nowadays is not likely to devote years of his life to *Popular Mechanics Illustrated*. But we forget that philanthropy was then a new religion, and an intensely evangelical one, and that its adherents all believed, with D'Holbach, that the key to happiness is knowledge.

It seldom occurred to the Encyclopaedists or their allies to regard Enlightenment as an end in itself, or to value knowledge for its own sake. They almost always took it for granted that Enlightenment needs justification, and their justification of it always was that Enlightenment *improves human life*. If they had become convinced that increased knowledge makes people worse, or leaves them no happier than they had been before, they would have abandoned their whole program at once. One of them—Rousseau—did become convinced of that proposition, and became for that reason an enemy of Enlightenment almost overnight.

This justification of Enlightenment was not a purely utilitarian one, though it is likely to sound so to our ears. With us, an association of ideas is so firmly established between new knowledge and useful applications, that when we come across a reference of life being "improved" by science, we are apt to think only of things which increase happiness: better medicine, more plentiful food, and the like. This in fact had been *Bacon's* whole conception of how the improvement of life is to be expected from science. But the eighteenth-century conception of the improvement of life by science was less narrowly utilitarian than either Bacon's or ours.

Kant spoke for many when he justified Enlightenment by reference, not to human happiness, but to *dignity*. He suggested, as a

motto for the Enlightenment, "*Sapere Aude*"—"Dare to Know!" To be content with old truths, he said, or to be imposed upon by old falsities, is suitable only to the pupillage of the human race. It belongs to the dignity of its adulthood, to discard old errors and to discover new truths.³

The Enlightenment had, then, an ethical justification of itself, as well as a utilitarian one. That vein of thought has never entirely petered out, either. But the ethical justification quickly became subordinated to the utilitarian one, and has remained so. This was quite inevitable. For Enlightenment was always conceived by its partisans as a blessing to the *whole* human race, whereas the progress of knowledge, or the dignity of it, is something which never matters to more than a small proportion of people. What is geocentrism or heliocentrism to most human beings? What is Newton's theory of gravitation, or Mendeléev's table, or quantum mechanics, or its successor? The progress of knowledge can be made of interest to the mass of mankind *only* by their being told that it will cure their diseases, lighten their labor, and so forth.

Accordingly, the utilitarian justification of Enlightenment had to be more and more insisted upon, to the exclusion of the ethical one. In this way the Enlightenment became committed to a certain promise, made to the human race at large: this was the promise that, by increasing knowledge, human happiness would be increased beyond all previous experience. In fact it would be nearer the truth to say that the Enlightenment became, by about the middle of the eighteenth century, *identified with* this promise.

Now, this promise which the Enlightenment held out has been kept in fact: modern science, as everyone knows, *has* enormously alleviated human misery. But there is an extraordinary fact about it, which is almost never noticed. This is that, when the promise was first made by Bacon, and for centuries afterwards during which the promise was constantly renewed, *there was no evidence whatever that it could be kept*.

Consider the year 1570, when Bacon was nine and D'Holbach's book was two hundred years in the future. Was there *then* any reason to believe that increased happiness was to be expected from increased knowledge? Was there at that date any ground for thinking that new natural knowledge would lighten labor, improve health, or multiply food? No, not the slightest; and everyone will admit this. But what is

almost never noticed is that the *same could be said with equal truth two hundred years later*, and indeed for a long time after that.

The period from 1570 to 1770 had certainly produced a great harvest of new knowledge; greater, in fact, than any earlier period of the same length could boast. But not a single important practical application had come out of all that new knowledge. The purpose of the *Encyclopaedia* was to convince its readers of the boundless possibilities of increasing happiness by the application of science; but it completely failed to produce this conviction, and deserved to fail. The simple and sufficient reason was that it could give only trifling examples in which, up to that time, happiness *had* been increased by applying scientific knowledge.

Labor was not lightened between 1570 and 1770. How could it have been? The only forms of energy available for human use in 1770 A.D. were those which had been available in 1770 B.C.: that is, near enough, just wind power, the power of falling water, and the power of animal or human muscles. Of course the load on human muscles might have been much lightened if there had been important new applications of water or wind power between 1570 and 1770. But there were not.

Medicine made no important advances between 1570 and 1770. Anatomy and physiology both did, but that is a very different thing, alas, from either preventing or curing disease or injury, or even from making them less disabling than they would otherwise be.

The greatest gift which suffering humanity has ever received from science is the good, abundant, and various food with which by now we are all so familiar. But what sign was there of that in 1770, any more than there had been in 1570? If you answer, "the potato," you speak the truth, but since it is also the whole truth of that matter, you merely concede the hopelessness of your case. Our food is a product of twentieth-century agriculture, and therefore depends upon knowledge which simply did not exist in 1770, when the very dawn of chemistry still lay a few years in the future.

By 1770 science had more than two thousand years of history behind it, and yet it had never once brought about any marked increase in human happiness. This simple historical fact is enough on its own to refute the Enlightenment delusions of Bacon and D'Holbach. Knowledge is *not* power. Lessening ignorance does not *always* lessen misery, or even typically have that effect.

But it may be salutary to add that there is in fact a connection of the most intimate kind between knowledge and *impotence*. Just as a man-made law tells you something which cannot be done without incurring a certain penalty, so a scientific or natural law tells you something which cannot be done, full stop: to build a perpetual-motion machine, to accelerate a body past the speed of light, or whatever it might be. In addition, a very large part of scientific knowledge is knowledge, not of laws or general principles, but of particular past facts: how the solar system was formed, the history of the earth, the evolution of organisms, and so forth. And all such facts, being past, afford no opportunity whatever for the exercise of human or even divine power.

If by now science *has* improved health, lightened labor and so on, this cannot be due to any virtue inherent in knowledge as such: the history of science is too long, and the Enlightenment's promise went unkept for too many centuries, to allow us to believe that. It must be due to some *particular* discoveries, of some quite unprecedented kind, which have been made since 1770. Just what these were, and how very recent they are, I will return to below.

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D'Holbach was a rich man, and a liberal patron of science. But it is perfectly clear from his book that he had no scientific interests himself, and that there was in fact only one thing which did interest him: the destruction of religion. When he said that human misery is due to ignorance of nature, he really meant that it is due to religion. This proposition is still stunningly ridiculous, but it is at least less so than what he said.

In his *The System of Nature*, not even the case which is made for atheism depends at all upon modern science. In fact nothing in the book does: it could just as easily have been written in the 1st century B.C. In all essential respects, indeed, it *was* written then. For *The System of Nature* is just Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* all over again, only many times longer, many times less well written, and many times coarser, both intellectually and morally.

It does not come easily to us now, to think of religion as a source of misery. We are far too familiar with the immense amount of misery that has resulted from the *absence* of religion. We therefore think

of religion, rather, as a source of happiness, or at least of comfort. And so it is, to many of the countless victims of twentieth-century atheist-terrorist governments and to a few people in the post-religious societies of the West. But those governments, and those societies, are themselves among the products of the Enlightenment's assault on religion. In 1770, when that assault was reaching its height, religion presented a very different face from the one it does now.

Religion could then be blamed for bloody wars; massacres, expulsions, and the persecutions of heretics; the craze of murdering witches; innumerable exactions of priests; the suppression of thought and even of natural curiosity; the forced sexual abstinence of thousands of men and women; flagellations and countless other "mortifications of the flesh"; the terror of punishments prolonged eternally after death. Such things as these formed, of course, the commonplaces of Enlightened denunciation; but it cannot possibly be denied that all these aspects of religion *were* fertile source of misery. It was all true, too true.

At the same time, it is equally undeniable that a list like the one I have just given makes a startlingly trivial comparison with the misery which *anti*-religious zeal has produced in our century. Indeed, it is hardly even a comparison: "not a game but a shame," as they say. How many Spanish Inquisitions equal one KGB? How many St. Bartholomew's Day massacres, plus expulsions of the Huguenots, would it take to equal the misery caused by Lenin plus Mao? Nor is it only in the *scale* of the suffering caused that anti-religion has thrown religion entirely into the shade: there is also a difference in the kind of suffering. In being put to death for the greater glory of God, or to prevent your own eternal damnation, you are being accorded a certain consideration, or at least importance. But to be put to death for the greater convenience of future generations of men and women, that is to be given the death of a cockroach or a flea. And this is to speak only of the societies in which religion has been actively persecuted. It is leaving out of account the misery of mere godlessness which now afflicts the free societies, where religion was never persecuted, but simply faded away under Enlightened criticism and ridicule.

But the Enlightenment's tale of the misery caused by religion is not only trivial in retrospect: it was always absurdly exaggerated even at the time. Take, for example, the belief in eternal torments after death. Of course it ought to have been a source of enormous

suffering, and in many individual cases it undoubtedly was. But the fear of hell was never as vivid or constant or widespread as, according to religious theory, it should have been: a fact which we know partly from the incessant complaints of the priests to that very effect. Stupidity, the occupations of common life, and the natural belief that hell is intended only for other people were always enough to prevent most Christians from being made as unhappy by their belief in hell as they should have been. It is the same with the voluntary mortifications and penances which were prompted by religious delusions. They were a source of much suffering, no doubt; but of nothing like so much as, on the beliefs which prompted them, they ought to have been, and of nothing like so much as the Enlightened believed them to be. The fact is, the Enlightened took religious beliefs far too literally and logically: a piece of folly which religious people, for their part, were hardly ever guilty of.

The same thing—a gross exaggeration, by the anti-religious, of the amount of suffering that religion causes—had happened once before. It was a major plank in the platform of ancient Epicureanism: Lucretius, for example, is full of it. No doubt the explanation is the same in the two cases. A doctor who could cure only one disease would be sure to over estimate both the severity and the extent of that disease. The Epicureans in antiquity could not lighten the labor of a single peasant, increase a harvest by one ounce, or prevent or cure a single illness; *and no more could the Enlightened in the eighteenth century*. The one thing that they both could do was to expel from some minds the misery which arises from religion. So they had to exaggerate beyond recognition the amount of misery which does arise from that source.

As well as this sizable *suggestio falsi*, the Enlightened were obliged to engage in a certain *suppressio veri*: they had to keep quiet about the suffering which results from the actual process of *losing* religious beliefs. This is something quite distinct, of course, from the *post*-religious misery of the twentieth century, but it was written everywhere on the face of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Parting with religion is not always an altogether painful process. But there is always pain in it, and in most cases the pain greatly predominates over every other feeling. It was a question often pressed upon the Enlightened, therefore, how they reconciled their professed concern for human happiness, with their willful assault on the prin-

ciple comfort of human life. The question is a very obvious one, indeed unmistakably vulgar, but it is a good question for all that. It is not easily answered, at least while the justification of Enlightenment is given as being that it increases happiness. Accordingly, the Enlightened never did answer this question, but took advantage of its vulgarity, and ignored it.

Hume, for example, ignored the following response by James Beattie to his attacks on religion. People like Hume, Beattie wrote, should remember that “in the solitary scenes of life, there is many an honest and tender heart pining with incurable anguish, pierced with the sharpest sting of disappointment, bereft of friends, chilled with poverty, racked with disease, scourged by the oppressor; whom nothing but trust in Providence, and the hope of a future of retribution, could preserve from the agonies of despair. And do they [the Enlightened], with sacrilegious hands, attempt to violate this last refuge of the miserable, and to rob them of the only comfort that had survived the ravages of misfortune, malice, and tyranny!”⁴

Even when every deduction has been made for the over-eloquence of this passage, I do not see, much as I admire and love Hume, what satisfactory reply he could have made to it. What reply could any of the Enlightened have made to it, at least while they rested their case for Enlightenment on the happiness it brings? The vulgar expectation that the Enlightened would, late in life, regret their attacks on religion—the expectation which led to the intense eighteenth- and nineteenth-century interest in “infidel deathbeds”—was, from the utilitarian point of view, a perfectly justified one. Anyway, Hume, though he was infuriated by the great popularity of Beattie’s book, never did reply.

The Enlightenment, then, both exaggerated the misery which arises from religion and partly concealed, and partly did not know, the misery that arises from the absence of religion. Nevertheless, it is certain that religion is one source of human misery, and that the Enlightenment did greatly reduce the misery which stems from that source.

Suppose, then, that you had challenged D’Holbach in 1770 to name a case in which happiness had been greatly increased by the advance of knowledge. Presumably he would have offered as an example the sharp decline of religion in the eighteenth century. How imperfect and doubtful an example that is, we have just seen, but what more satisfactory example could he or anyone have given of

general happiness being increased by new knowledge? Up to 1770, there *was* no such example.

Yet the promise that happiness would be greatly increased by the progress of science has (as I said) been kept. It was kept first, and carried out furthest, in the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, the Scandinavian countries, and Germany. Britain is the case which is on the whole best known, and for that reason I will usually take it as my example in what follows. But now, *when* was the Enlightenment's promise kept?

* * *

In 1790, in Britain, there was a certain problem about food which occupied the attention, with greater or less degree of urgency, of most of the population every day. This problem was how to get enough of it. In 1890 that was still the case. But by 1990 the only problem about food, though again a problem virtually universal, was how to avoid putting on weight.

In 1790 most men and millions of women had to do hard physical work in order to get a living. That was still the case in 1890. But by 1990 absolutely no one *had* to work hard, and almost no one did. Instead there is now an almost universal problem of how to get enough physical exercise. The scourge of long working-hours has likewise given way to the scourge of leisure.

In 1890, as in 1790, almost no one had water under pressure available nearly everywhere. By 1990 hardly anyone was without that blessing. Most people's housing, domestic heating, lighting, and facilities for cooking or preserving food, differed little in 1890 from what they had been in 1790. But they differed immeasurably from what they were to be by 1990.

Horses did almost all the work in land-transport, whether of goods or of people, in 1790, and in 1890 they still did by far the greater part of it: unless you or your goods happened to be literally at a railway station, there was no alternative. But in 1890 access to horse-power in any form was an expense which working-class people could not afford to incur often. These people, in order to go anywhere, and even to go to work and back, seldom had any alternative to walking. By 1990, fast and comfortable travel for people, and efficient transport of goods, were everywhere available to almost everyone.

And this is in spite of the hindrance to traffic caused by thousands of middle-class people “jogging” or riding a bicycle.

There were a few, though only a few, important medical advances between 1790 and 1890: anesthetics in surgery, and the prevention of one or two diseases by inoculation or antiseptics. Yet by comparison with the medical attention which is now available to everyone, the best that was available in 1890, to even the most privileged people, scarcely deserves to be called medical attention at all.

In short, it is in the last hundred years, and not before, that the application of increasing scientific knowledge has brought about in Britain and elsewhere a great and general increase of happiness. In respect of such goods as food, water, warmth, light, shelter, health, and mobility, and of the work which people needed to do in order to obtain what they did of such goods, the Britain of 1890 was a hundred times more like the Britain of 1790 than that of 1990. The economy of the nation in 1890 still depended, as every earlier human economy had depended, principally upon one tiny energy source: muscle. In contrast, by 1990, human muscle had become an economic irrelevance, and horse muscle, except as a subject for gambling, likewise.

1890 is a hundred years after Lavoisier, two hundred years after Newton, and three hundred and fifty years after Copernicus. Yet at that date the most advanced country on earth was still basically a muscle economy. So very long delayed, then, was the fulfillment of the Enlightenment’s promise about knowledge and happiness.

Of course I am not denying the existence of the industrial revolution which is usually ascribed to the nineteenth century. Britain was transformed, between about 1770 and 1850, from a predominantly agricultural country into a predominantly industrial one. The critical events, as everyone agrees, were certain improvements in cotton-mill machinery and in the production of iron and steel, and the introduction of the steam engine. What I do deny is that this famous revolution constituted any sort of fulfillment of the Enlightenment’s promise.

The industrial revolution, though it made Britain far richer as a nation than it had been before, did not bring about a pronounced and general increase in happiness. On the contrary, by making employment more unpredictable, work longer, harder, and unhealthier, and housing worse, it brought about an immense overall increase in misery. This increase has very often been exaggerated,

of course, but it is scarcely possible to doubt its reality; otherwise, virtually everyone who wrote about urban Britain between 1790 and 1890 must have been hallucinated or telling lies. Anyway, I am asserting only the negative proposition, that no marked and general *increase* in happiness resulted from the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century. And few people will dispute this.

That revolution cannot possibly be counted, then, as a fulfillment of the Enlightenment's promise. But we should also remember that it was microscopic in scale, by comparison with the economic revolution which began around 1890. Compare, for example, the impact of the steam-train on the nineteenth century with that of the automobile on the twentieth. There is (as people say) simply no comparison. Nor is there, in their respective effects on happiness. For every one person who ever felt "Thank God for the train!" there must be millions who have often felt "Thank God for the car!"

* * *

The economic revolution of the last hundred years is a fruit of capitalism. Insofar as it has taken place at all in any other kind of economy, it has been an importation, and an incongruous one, not a spontaneous home growth. But even where it was a home growth it was, as we have seen, a late and surprising development. Capitalist countries had existed for centuries without giving any sign of what they were going to do for human happiness between 1890 and 1990.

Not only did this late fruit of capitalism give no advance notice of itself: it came forth entirely against the spirit of the age. It did not begin until soon after the moment—about 1875—when a profound and universal reaction had set in *against* capitalism.

By 1900 there were few men in Europe, and even fewer women, who did not regard the rapid progress of socialism with some degree of approbation, or at least with resignation. "We are all socialists nowadays," said the future King Edward VII in 1895; and, with unimportant exceptions, it was the literal truth. The next hundred years, though they were years of unprecedented economic improvement in countries like Britain, were also years in which anti-capitalist sentiment everywhere became ever more intense and widespread. In this period, private property was abolished, and communist economies were established, over a large part of the world; and this was

only the most emphatic expression of a flood of feeling which was sweeping over the *whole* world.

Britain in the nineteenth century was the main theatre of a very momentous contest between two facets of the Enlightenment: between its ethics and its economics. Its ethics were of course utilitarian: the greatest happiness of the greatest number was the criterion of morality, and benevolence, consequently, was deemed the highest personal virtue. But the Enlightenment also had a second absolute moral value, beside utility: equality. Now these two values together plainly prescribe *equality of property*. And what way is there of securing lasting equality of property, except *community* of property?

The economists, however, argued in the following way. In a communist economy, no one could hope to improve his own or his children's economic position by industry, honesty and prudence, and no one need fear to worsen that position by the opposite qualities. No one, consequently, would have any motive to work or save. A communist country must therefore become in a few decades, as, Thomas Malthus said, "a nation of paupers with a community of goods."⁵ A foretaste of communism already existed, in the Poor Laws then in force, and those laws, the economists again argued, actually *created* the poverty which they existed to relieve; for they both attracted people into the Poor Law system, by rewarding economic dependence, and forced other people into it, by penalizing economic independence.

These arguments were not answered at the time, or indeed afterwards; but then arguments, especially if they have disagreeable conclusions, are seldom a match for very strong feelings. In this nineteenth-century contest, the economists' arguments were simply swept aside by the flood of egalitarian benevolence. Indeed the contest between the two was not even prolonged much beyond the middle of the century. By 1875 the resolve to ameliorate the "deplorable condition of the labouring classes" had become the overriding determinant of the nation's entire domestic policy. The old Poor Laws gradually lost their importance, but only because they became merged into a far larger system of the same benevolent kind: what later came to be called "the welfare state."

This means a state which takes money away from people in whose hands it might create wealth, and gives it instead to people in whose hands it cannot possibly do so: the unemployed, the earners of very low incomes, the aged, the sick, the handicapped, unmarried mothers, etc., etc. Millions more people have to be paid, of course, merely

for administering this immense redistribution of wealth. This system has grown by leaps and bounds for more than a hundred years. In defiance of loud and repeated resolutions of governments to reverse its growth, the welfare system still continues to absorb an increasing proportion of the nation's population and wealth; exactly as the economists had warned that it always would, as long as it existed at all. A system which rewards the economically dependent, and penalizes the independent, *must* be a "positive feed back system" (as engineers say) for the creation of poverty.

The Enlightenment ethics which brought about the welfare state also brought about another gigantic form of economic parasitism: trade unions. This form, too, has continually gathered strength for the last hundred years. By now, not only does no one *have* to work as hard as millions had to in 1890: no one, or at least no one of the "working class," works hard at all. A doctor, farmer, or businessman, for example, may work hard, but it is entirely out of the question for a wharf-laborer, miner, factory-worker, or laborer to do so, at any rate at his place of employment. Even if he wanted to work hard, his trade union exists partly for the express purpose of preventing him from doing so. In addition, of course, what counts as "hard" work, like what counts as "poverty" is constantly though silently redefined, always in a benevolent direction.

But even the welfare state and trade unions are, after all, only very incomplete realizations of Enlightenment ethics. Egalitarian benevolence cannot be fully satisfied by anything short of communism, and anyone of average intelligence can see this. The communist movement, accordingly, constantly grew stronger throughout the nineteenth century, and by 1905, led by Lenin, Parvus, and Trotsky, it was strong enough to attempt the overthrow of private property in Russia. They missed their mark, but it was obvious to all that they had missed it only narrowly, and were not likely to miss it a second time, especially if a European war came. It did come and, with Parvus having enlisted the help of the German High Command, Lenin did not miss his mark a second time in 1917. By 1924 similar attempts had been made, with varying degrees of success, in Austria, Bavaria, Hungary, and elsewhere. It was then not only a Bolshevik opinion that private property was within a hairsbreadth of joining slavery and feudalism on "the rubbish heap of history": this was the opinion of virtually every informed person in the world.

But against all probability, the event has been otherwise, and the economic outcome has been the very opposite of what would have resulted from communism. In countries like Britain, private property has not only not been abolished, but by mid-century everyone was far better off, in absolute economic terms, than their grandparents had been in 1890. Capitalism has been given a last minute reprieve, or at least a stay of execution.

What can one conclude, but that some powerful new factor must have come to the help of capitalism in the nick of time? It must have come out of the blue too, for no one (as I have just said) saw in advance any possibility of a reprieve. This new factor must also have been so vastly productive of wealth that it outweighed the inherent tendency of Enlightenment ethics to leave nothing, after a few decades, but "a nation of paupers with a community of goods."

What was this factor? In what general area are we even to look for it? Well, recall Malthus' unanswered argument, and the fact that in 1890 even the most advanced economies still depended principally on the muscles of men and animals.

Egalitarian benevolence prescribes community of property, and community of property removes every economic motive for working hard. The economic effects of this removal would be bad anywhere, but they must obviously be worst in a *pure* muscle economy: one where muscle is the only source of energy available for producing economic goods. Animals, after all, are even less disposed than humans are to work hard without the goad of necessity: to get them to tax their muscles on our behalf, some man must tax *his* muscles. Ploughing with horses (unlike ploughing with a tractor) is hard work: and then, in a communist society, the question "Why *me*?" is a peculiarly unanswerable one. Enlightenment ethics, then, will be the more economically disastrous, the closer the society is to being a pure muscle economy.

This proposition has been resoundingly confirmed many times over during the present century. Russia in 1917 was even more of a muscle economy than Britain had been in 1890, and egalitarian benevolence was then imposed upon it with a thoroughness which Britain has never yet had to endure. What the economic consequences were, is known to everyone by now. The same combination of Enlightenment ethics with a primitive economy has since been tried in many other countries, of course. But the economic outcome has in every case been exactly the one which Malthus predicted.

So if in countries like Britain, by contrast, the disastrous economic tendency of Enlightenment ethics has been much outweighed, the reason probably is that these countries in the last hundred years have moved rapidly away from the muscle economy. This process began around 1890.

In 1892 Henry Ford built his first car, and between 1908 and 1927 he sold fifteen million of them. He sold his first tractor around 1917. By 1950 virtually all agriculture had come to depend upon the internal-combustion engine. So had virtually all transport, whether of goods or of people. As a result, agriculture and transport had become incomparably more efficient, and more painless too, than they had been from the dawn of history up to a few decades before.

The economic benefits which have flowed from the petrol engine are too familiar to need illustration. They are in fact too familiar to be visible any longer to most of their beneficiaries, and are also by now much obscured by undesirable effects flowing from the same cause. The following tiny illustration, drawn from the field of rural labor in the first third of this century, may help some readers to realize, or to remember, what petrol has done for human happiness, and how recently.

R.M. Williams is an Australian who is now rich, an old man, and something of a national institution, referred to by millions just as "R.M." In 1927, however, he was living in the bush with his wife and baby, with a sheet of canvas as their only shelter; and the only work he could get was digging wells, in the killing sun of northern South Australia, with a pick, shovel, and crowbar. I cannot speak for the reader, but for my own part I never think of this work without a catch in my breath. Yet within far less than a century all our lives have been transformed just as surely as has R.M.'s. The next time you are about to pronounce a fashionable curse on bulldozers, remember R.M.

* * *

You will search the records of the 1890s in Britain very long indeed before you find even the faintest anticipation of the petrol engine revolution then impending. Indeed you could, as far as I know, search them in vain forever. I say this not at all in a whiggish spirit, as evidence of the shortsightedness of our forefathers: quite

the opposite, in fact. Until about 1890, as I have said, there was no historical reason to expect from science *any* great and general increase in happiness. Least of all was there any reason to anticipate from it an entirely new source of energy, so powerful and flexible that in the space of a generation it revolutionized agriculture, transport, and freedom of movement.

But as though the petrol engine revolution were not a sufficiently improbable event, the 1890s brought to birth a second entirely new source of energy, and one even more amazingly plastic to human purposes than petrol: electricity.

It may seem a mistake to date the electrical revolution from as late as the 1890s. It was in the second quarter of the century that Faraday laid the foundations of our knowledge of electricity, and some important applications of his discoveries were made very soon afterwards. Long distance telegraphy came in the 1850s, and the telephone in the 1870s. It is not, however, a scientific or even a technological revolution that I am concerned with here, but a certain economic one: a great and general increase in happiness. Communication was made much easier by the telephone and telegraph, but ease of communication is only a very indirect blessing when it is a blessing at all, and not a nuisance or worse. Before 1890 there was in fact no important contribution made by electricity to human happiness.

Even when those contributions did begin to arrive, the most important ones were not those which we are now most likely to recall. For example, we tend to forget that city dwellers had had for decades good and cheap lighting by gas; so we are apt to imagine that domestic lighting by electricity was a greater improvement than it really was. Again, some of us old Australians can remember that the “ice chest” (“ice box” in America) was a greater boon, when *it* first arrived, than the electric refrigerator was when it first became common in the late 1940s. Even the fact that electricity abolished hard physical work in the factory and in the home, just as petrol abolished it on the farm and on the road, is not quite the essence of the electrical revolution.

The essence is that electricity brought about an *industrial* revolution, compared with which “the industrial revolution” of the nineteenth century was an extremely small and feeble joke. Electricity became, as steam had never even looked like becoming, the form of

energy by which virtually *all large scale work whatever is performed*, outside agriculture and the distribution of goods. Whatever muscle, water, wind, steam or gas did for us in 1890, electricity does for us far more efficiently now, if it is something we still want done. This is the fundamental economic change which began in countries like ours around 1890; and it is one which would have effected a vast economic improvement, even if it had not also improved domestic lighting, refrigeration, and the like.

At least, that is half of the essence of the electrical revolution. But think, in addition, of how much electricity does for us now that we did *not* want done in 1890, and could not have dreamed of wanting done! Many, perhaps most, of the products of industrial electricity are *at least as new as the power which produces them*. Just consider electrical appliances, petrol engines, synthetic materials, the entire pharmacopeia, etc., etc. There has never been anything remotely like this before. Steam made nothing, or next to nothing, that had not previously been made without steam. But industrial electricity has already made countless new things, and constantly makes both the materials, and the machinery, for making more.

The economic improvement of the last hundred years is like a meteorite cloud: it contains a few huge bits, and more middle-sized ones, but consists principally of millions of tiny bits. Our overall economic improvement is mainly a mass effect of millions of tiny economic improvements. For example, a chemical engineer finds that a certain synthetic compound, invented for quite some other purpose, makes a better insulator for a certain machine part than anything currently on the market. A mine manager notices that his present method of extracting or refining a certain mineral is needlessly wasteful at one point. A hospital biochemist discovers a quicker and more reliable way of identifying a certain pathological condition. It is countless *minutiae* such as these which make up most of our economic revolution, and they are infinitely various in their nature. But it is perfectly certain that every single one of them, at any rate within the last fifty years, has depended upon electric power *at every stage of its development*: in the laboratory, in the workshop, in the factory, in the office, in the boardroom.

The benefits of the electrical revolution are even more invisible to its beneficiaries than are those of the petrol revolution: at least you can *see* petrol. It is hard to bring home to our minds either the extent

of our dependence on electricity, or the moment-to-moment character of this dependence. But, remembering that electricity cannot to any significant extent be stored, suppose that at midnight tonight all electricity generating plants (above, say, the size of small diesel generators which farmers have) were destroyed by terrorists, Martians, or an act of God. Within twenty-four hours every oil refinery, every food processing operation and every factory, would stop for good, including the factories which make or repair electricity generating equipment. You could not even get a drop of water out of a tap.

After the Enlightenment's promise about knowledge and happiness had gone unkept for more than three hundred years, something enabled it to be kept in this past century. At the same time, something enabled the institution of private property to survive in countries like Britain, just when the ethical values of the Enlightenment were poised to extinguish it everywhere. I believe that this something was the same in both cases: namely, the combination of the internal-combustion engine with industrial electricity, for this combination brought to an end the immemorial dependence of wealth on muscle, and ushered in an energy regime incomparably more favorable to human happiness.

* * *

Causal connections can be real without being unconditional. There is a real causal connection, for example, between adding a teaspoon of sugar to your tea, and making the tea sweeter: but it does not hold in all conditions indifferently. Your tea will not be made sweet if, for example, you add a soup-spoon of petrol at the same time as the sugar.

Just so, electricity and the internal-combustion engine would not have increased wealth and happiness as greatly as they did, but for certain other factors. One of these, and one which has been widely recognized, is the great increase in the practice of contraception after about 1900. If the average size of families had still been in 1940 what it was in 1890, the new energy sources would have done much less than they did for general happiness.

For the same general reason, it is no objection to what I have said, that electricity and the internal-combustion engine did not do much for the economy of Russia after 1917. Lenin's famous "discovery"

of 1919, that “communism equals soviet power plus electrification,” had shown a glimmer of common sense, though at the cost of implying a sweeping dismissal of Marx, who was necessarily ignorant of electrification when he died in 1883. Stalin had enough common sense to see, by about 1926, that he had to go all-out for electricity-based industry and petrol-based agriculture. Hence the dynamo and the tractor as state icons, though the latter had the additional advantage, of course, of being a horse which starving peasants could not eat. But by 1926, after all, anyone’s common sense would have told them that much.

Such common sense as the Bolshevik leaders possessed, however, was no match for their Enlightenment ethics of equality and benevolence. They were entirely right, as far as consistency goes. Those ethical values do prescribe equality of property, which, to be permanent, does require community of property. So private property had to be abolished. But communism, though it stems from the same ethical values as the welfare state and trade unions, is an economic burden far greater than even those two together. It has turned out, in fact, to be so great an economic burden that even the combined power of electricity and the internal-combustion engine can make little headway against it. But this does not contradict what I said above. It is simply another case of the teaspoon-of-sugar-and-soup- spoon-of-petrol kind.

So much, incidentally, for Marx’s celebrated “economic interpretation of history.” Communist revolutions are so far from conforming to that interpretation that they are among the plainest of all cases of the *subjection* of “the means of production” to “mere ideas”; and to *moral* ideas, supposedly the most derivative ones of all, at that.

Notes

1. Baron D’Holbach, *The System of Nature* (1770), New York: Burt Franklin, 1970, p. viii.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 271.
3. See the essay, “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?” (1784), reproduced in Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 1983.
4. This passage is from the second-last paragraph of part III, ch. III, of James Beattie, *An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth* (1770), New York: Garland, 1983.
5. Thomas R. Malthus, *An Essay on Population* (1798), ed. by M.P. Fogarty, 2 vols., London: J.M. Dent and Sons and New York: E.P. Dutton and Co. (Everyman’s Library), 1958, vol. II, p. 236.

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3

The Bateson Fact, or One in a Million

Many people can drive a car, but how many car drivers could get work as car repairers? Very few: surely not more than three in a hundred. Then, among competent car repairers how many would have been capable of *inventing* the internal-combustion engine, or the gearbox, or differential? Obviously, only some far smaller proportion still. At a guess, let us say three in a thousand.

These two figures, multiplied, give us nine in a hundred thousand, or ninety in a million, as the number of potential car inventors among actual car drivers. This figure is evidently many times too high. Who will believe that, in every million car drivers, there are as many as ninety potential car inventors? There are probably not ninety potential clothes-peg inventors. As for potential car inventors, one in a million would be much nearer the mark.

All our technology is like that. Take electrical power, for example. We all know how to use it. But how many of us can repair a television set? Perhaps five in a thousand. There are, perhaps, another five in a thousand who can repair an electric motor. Possibly another ten people are competent to “rewire” a building. Added together, all these groups make up (let us suppose) fifty in a thousand. Now, of these fifty, how many could have *invented* the electric motor, or television, or electric light? To say “one” would clearly be an enormous overestimate. It would imply that there is an Edison among every

This essay was written in 1990.—Ed.

thousand people, or a thousand Edisons in every million: but Edisons are not at all so easy to come by. Again, one in a million would be much nearer the mark.

It is the same in science as it is in invention. Newton opened the door to a new world of knowledge: a world which was enlarged, in the succeeding centuries, by some hundreds of other people, and which millions of ordinary people have by now had the privilege of making themselves to some degree at home in. Darwin did a similar thing, and in this case an even larger number of us have been allowed an *entrée* to this world of knowledge. But how many of us could have opened either door in the first place? It is easy enough, for many of us, to imagine ourselves neglected geniuses: "mute inglorious Miltons," and the like. But if you think you are another Newton or Darwin, or think you know someone else who is, then while of course you *may* be right, it is at least a million to one that you are wrong. A third example is Faraday, who opened up a new world of knowledge even more single-handedly than either Newton or Darwin. If ever there was a man in a million, both in relation to his contemporaries and in relation to his intellectual beneficiaries, it was Faraday. But he also supplied, of course, the basic science underlying the inventions of Edison and others: a fact which makes him, not one benefactor to a million beneficiaries, but one to *thousands of millions* of beneficiaries.

It is the same in literature and music as it is in science and invention. By now, millions of people have read *King Lear* and *Hamlet* with some approach to a proper appreciation of what they were reading. Since one of those readers did in fact write them, we know that at least one reader *could* have. But will anyone confidently name a second who could have done so? Every year for more than two hundred years, thousands of people have listened, with wonder and gratitude, to Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* and Mozart's *Requiem*. Are there, in every million people, as many as two who could have written either? Are there, for example, among Australia's present seventeen millions, *thirty-four* potential Bachs or Mozarts? No one will say so, except someone willing to say that there are in fact thirty-four thousand of them, or indeed seventeen million. Such people are not worth reasoning with.

What I have said so far is all very obvious. That Shakespeare, Newton, Edison, and the others, were each of them men in a million, and that these benefactors stand to their beneficiaries in about the same proportion: surely this is a fact which is known to every educated person?

So it is. But it is also a fact which is as widely forgotten as it is widely known. When, before now, did you see it stated in print? Seldom or never, because it almost never *has* been stated in print. I call it "the Bateson fact," because the English biologist William Bateson (1861-1926) is the only writer I know who has tried to make people remember it.¹ And even he entirely failed to do so.

Since we all know the Bateson fact, what can have condemned it to oblivion? Some of the forces at work here are obvious enough. There is the apotheosis of "*das Volk*" by certain nineteenth-century Romantics. There is the determination of Marxist historians to find the roots of progress only in the anonymous "masses." There is the general reaction of twentieth-century historians against individualism: against Carlyle's category of "heroes," and against the popular belief in "great men."

The intellectual feebleness of these influences is evident enough. So is their interested character. The axe which Marxists have to grind, and their indifference to truth, are by now generally known. Then, a twentieth-century professor of history can hardly be a hero himself, and he naturally finds it comfortable to believe that no one else can either. Nevertheless, there is one thing which historians *have* discovered, and which goes some way to excuse their forgetting the Bateson fact.

This is what you might call "the foothills effect." When we first see a great mountain in the distance, we hardly ever notice at the time the foothills in which it takes its rise. But when we approach it more closely, the foothills force themselves on our attention, and some of them turn out to be formidable peaks themselves. Just so, when historians learn a great deal about Newton, Edison, or Shakespeare, they always discover the existence of a "support-staff" which is quite invisible to non-specialists: a body of predecessors, or collaborators, or stimulating rivals, to the great man. Thus, while everyone has heard of Newton, the names of Hooke, Barrow, and Flamsteed, for example, are known only to scholars. Charles Darwin's name is a household word, but his grandfather Erasmus, Robert

Chambers, and even A.R. Wallace, are strictly historian-fodder. And so on.

Well, it is true, and important, that nothing and no one ever comes *absolutely* out of the blue, and historians are right to remind us of this truth. But the reaction of most modern historians to the foothills effect has been entirely wrong. They have used the number and size of the foothills to obscure the very existence of the great mountains.

The right reaction to it would be this. "Let Newton and Edison and Shakespeare be found, on closer examination, to have had a support-staff of thirty, or three hundred, or a thousand. By all means redistribute, over a thousand people, the fame which the vulgar lavish on one man. *Even then the disproportion, between the number of the benefactors and the number of their beneficiaries, would still be about the same.* It would still be of the order of about one in a million."

In point of fact, it is ludicrous to suppose that any of the heroes of science, invention, or art, has ever had a support-staff of a thousand, or even a hundred. A socialist historian of astronomy, a few decades ago, could only find a support-staff of about eight for Copernicus, though he combed the entire earlier history of the world. No one could possibly get Faraday's support-staff up to twelve, even by counting the laboratory cleaners; it would take a People's Professor of the History of Science even to get it up to seven. Charles Darwin certainly had an unpleasant habit of not acknowledging his intellectual debts until pressed to do so; but even his ablest detractors have not been able to find more than about a dozen support-staff behind *The Origin of Species*. For our fashionable historians, the most galling case of all is Gregor Mendel: he had no support-staff at all, not even (since he was a monk) a wife. Still, an average present-day historian, if given a grant and some research assistants, could no doubt prove that Mendel overworked the monastery's gardeners, stole their observations, and oppressed his plants into the bargain. (Why else were so many of his peas wrinkled?) But the point to be insisted on, as I said, is that if Mendel and all the others *had* had a thousand support-staff each, their beneficiaries would still outnumber these benefactors by about a million to one.

According to Bateson, we constantly say things which we ourselves know to be false concerning the great advances which, since about 1500 A.D., have been made in knowledge, invention, and art. For we constantly ascribe them to large and indefinite social causes: "the Renaissance," or the spread of literacy, the decline of centralized religion, the "rising middle class" (that favorite of the feeble-minded), or something else equally gaseous and gigantic. Yet all the while, Bateson says, in every case the decisive causal factor was the exceptional gifts of some individual, and we *know* this: we even know, in most cases, who these individuals were.

"Oh no," says the modish historian, "quite the reverse. It is the *context* which is decisive: the prevailing economic, social, and political conditions. If *The Origin of Species* had been published in 1559 instead of 1859, the book and its author would have been burnt instead of idolized. Faraday's research on electricity would have counted for nothing if governments and capitalists had not been interested, around 1850, in improved means of communication." And so on, forever.

The trouble with this kind of thing is that, whenever it is not plain false, it is trivially true: it is knocking on open doors. Neither Bateson nor anyone else ever imagined that the gifts of exceptional individuals possess a kind of fatality, and will be exercised whatever the surrounding circumstances might be. No one needs to be told, for example, that Newton would never have written the *Principia* if the Great Plague had left him permanently comatose from the age of twenty-three. *Of course* exceptional gifts, or any gifts, or any causal power of any kind, will be exercised only if external circumstances permit it to be exercised: that is a completely trivial proposition. The question of substance is how, when something exceptional *is* achieved, the causal power responsible for it is shared out, between the individual's gifts and his social context. On which side is causal power *concentrated*?

Questions of this kind are very familiar, and often even homely: they come up all the time. For example, you decide to grow some beans: perhaps you are tired of the tasteless frozen ones that you buy. You therefore get hold of some bean seeds. You will not need to be told, by a modern historian or anyone else, that bean seeds on their own are not enough to produce bean plants. *Of course* the surrounding circumstances have to be right. Everyone knows that light, air, water and nutrients are needed as well, in order to grow beans.

But everyone also knows where the power to produce bean plants is concentrated: it is nearly all in the seeds. Every bean seed literally contains a detailed and complete program, or disposition, or gift, or genetic code, for producing a bean plant; and nothing else in the world does. Least of all is there anything remotely like that program in any combination, even the most favorable, of light, air, water, and nutrients. Just to make the causal asymmetry still more pronounced, the disposition in bean seeds to produce bean plants is very *strong*: given only certain minimum conditions, the disposition will be realized in a very wide range of sub-optimal circumstances. Even the most inexpert gardener can grow beans.

It is essentially the same in the production of great works in science, invention, or art: causal power is concentrated in the gifts of individual organisms, not in the circumstances around them. The education, or any other external circumstances, of a Newton or a Darwin, is a factor which is *demonstrably* subsidiary, like air and water in the bean case; because all such factors are common to many, while only a few are chosen. The education in biology which Darwin received, he received in common with hundreds of other people across Europe. Hundreds, likewise, received the same education in mathematics and physics as Newton did. Yet how different were the outcomes in their cases!

In 1696 the famous Swiss mathematician John Bernoulli published throughout Europe a request for solutions to two mathematical problems which he had been unable to solve. He originally allowed six months for their solution, but when Leibniz asked for twelve months in order to solve just the second of the two problems he granted the extension. Newton solved both in twenty-four hours. His solutions were sent in anonymously, but, as Bernoulli said afterwards, “the lion can be recognised by his claw.”

Do I hear any offers to explain a fact like this in terms of some external circumstances or other? There would appear to be plenty of scope for some such explanation. After all, Newton was a perfect example of the good old “rising middle class.” He was a *protégé* of the Whig Lords who had triumphed in 1688. He even had an important connection with the Treasury. No offers still? Oh well

When Bateson insisted on what I am calling his fact, he was contending against the “externalism” of the Enlightenment: the belief (as William Godwin put it) that “the characters of men originate in their external circumstances.” If you took the externalism of such people as Godwin and Helvétius literally, and extended it to other organisms, then you would believe that even bean seeds are not needed in order to grow beans. Bones, birds, eggs, or even nothing at all, would do just as well, as long as you knew enough about what external influences to expose them to. Equally, given bean seeds to start with, the right choice of “education” for them would enable the seeds to yield grapefruit, garfish, good books, or anything you like. Did this kind of lunacy expire with the eighteenth century, or even with Stalin’s favorite biologist, Lysenko, in 1976? On the contrary, it is the underlying assumption of behaviorist psychology and of most anthropologists to this hour and, within contemporary Faculties of Arts, it is a belief *de rigueur*.

With those lunatic exceptions, however, everyone has always recognized that human beings, like all other organisms, are the result of interaction between what they bring to the world, and what the world brings to them: between their nature and their nurture, as Francis Galton put it. But until the birth of genetics a hundred years ago, nothing whatever was known of the actual ways in which the *nature* of organisms is determined. It could hardly be said to have been known with certainty, even, that it is by inheritance. Since then, however, an enormous amount has been learnt about genetics, and a great deal about human genetics in particular.

As a result, it has become common to divide the causes, which make human beings what they are, into two broad classes: the genetic ones and the cultural ones. Of course it needs to be remembered that the words “cultural” or “culture,” when so employed, have a far wider sense than they usually do. Here, “culture” comprehends *all* non-genetic causes which contribute to making people what they are.

So understood, the division into genetic and cultural causes is not only common but correct. Non-human organisms have only one way of forming the character of their young: by genes. But humans have an additional way: by culture. We cannot convince our children in advance, by means of our genes, of many things that we would like them to believe: for example, that Montaigne and Euclid

and Monteverdi are worthy of their acquaintance. So we store those men's works in libraries, and later try, by means of culture, to steer some of the young towards them.

But now, the Bateson fact allows us to see that the common division into genetic and cultural causes, though not incorrect, is almost always incorrectly applied. What we almost always think of is two kinds of cause, both independent but interacting to produce a mixed effect. That is, we typically think of both genes and culture as acting independently to help produce who we are. But in light of the Bateson fact, that picture greatly under represents the causal power of our genes. It leaves out a vital causal "loop." Instead of genes and culture acting independently, we should instead have a picture in which our genes affect not only us, but our culture as well. That is, genes and culture are not two independent but co-ordinate causes, working to make us who we are. *Even in culture, most causal power is concentrated in our genes.* It is so, at least insofar as the culture into which we are born consists of a certain fund of knowledge, invention, and art. For those things themselves are chiefly the effects of the genes of a tiny handful of individuals.

For example, try to bring before your mind—though no one can do this adequately—the absolute and universal dependence of our present culture on electrical knowledge and technology. And then recall that all this knowledge and technology, or near-enough all, can be traced back, along lines of causation which are as plain as day, not to "the needs of imperial expansion in 1850" or any such professorial puerility, but to the astounding intellectual gifts of one man: Michael Faraday. A man, it may be worthwhile to add, who possessed no advantage whatever *except* his individual gifts. He was the son of a blacksmith, attended school briefly if at all, and was, from the age of thirteen to twenty-one, nothing more than a book binder's apprentice.

Note

1. Bateson never wrote at length about this fact, as far as I know, but he touched on it a number of times. His most extended statement of it is in *William Bateson, F.R.S., Naturalist*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928, on p. 309. This book consists of a selection of his essays and addresses, and a memoir by his widow.

Part II

Why the World is the Way It Is

“Defects of empirical knowledge have less to do with the ways we go wrong in philosophy than defects of character do: such things as the simple inability to shut up; determination to be thought deep; hunger for power; fear, especially the fear of an indifferent universe.”

—David Stove, *“What is Wrong with Our Thoughts”* (1990)

4

The Malthus Check

Modern biology was conceived—sperm got through to ovum, so to speak—when Thomas Malthus’ idea of population-pressure got through to Charles Darwin in 1838. But that event was undreamt of in 1798, when Malthus published *On Population*. This little book was not intended as a contribution to biology: it was intended as a check to the utopian political ideas of the Enlightenment. Its full title was *An Essay on the Principle of Population, as it affects the Future Improvement of Society, with remarks on the Speculations of Mr. Godwin, M Condorcet, and other writers*. This is the only instance, as far as I know, in which a political tract has made possible an important advance in science.

* * *

The Enlightenment had led a charmed life until Malthus came along: it had never had a serious intellectual setback. Of course there had been intellectual resistance to it, all along and everywhere. As Hazlitt says in his essay on Malthus in *The Spirit of the Age* (1925), there had been plenty of “answers to Modern Philosophy, ... antidotes to liberty and humanity, ... abusive Histories of the Greek and Roman republics,” etc. But for the most part, the intellectual resistance was feeble, and Enlightenment ideas, especially in France, had carried all before them, even in government and ecclesiastical circles. The resistance did, indeed, finally produce two great books: Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), and de Maistre’s *Considerations on France* (1797). But as well as coming much too

This essay was written in 1990. It has been slightly abridged.—Ed.

late, these books entirely failed, or rather they did not even attempt, to meet the Enlightenment on its own ground. They did not try to show that Enlightenment ideas—of religion, of human history, of morals, of government—were false or incomplete: only that they were dangerous. In essence, these two books were calls for people to “return to their obedience,” in view of the fearful consequences, by then manifest, of embracing Enlightenment ideas. Such a call, however wise or otherwise, could do nothing to discredit the Enlightenment intellectually.

Earlier in the century, there *had* been direct intellectual resistance to the Enlightenment, offered by minds of the first rank. But the results had been uniformly disastrous. The resistances seemed to be almost pathetically unable to “find the range” of its enemies. For example Bishop Butler, in *The Analogy of Religion* (1736), had argued that the then fashionable skepticism about the Bible ought, logically, to be extended to skepticism about the whole of Christianity: there being objections to the Divine Authorship of nature as weighty as the objections to the Divine Authorship of the Bible. Joseph Butler was a good philosopher, as well as a good man, but it simply never occurred to him that this attempted *reductio ad absurdum* would be accepted with glee by the more thoroughgoing among his adversaries.

An even more embarrassing miscalculation was made by Edmund Burke in 1756, when he published *A Vindication of Natural Society*. This was meant to parody Bolingbroke’s criticisms of religion, by straight-facedly developing the *political* parallels of those criticisms. Burke intended, as he said in his preface, “to show that, without the exertion of any considerable forces, the same engines which were employed for the destruction of religion, might be employed with equal success for the subversion of government” Alas, he carried out this intention so persuasively that very few readers of the book realized that a parody, and a *reductio ad absurdum*, had been intended! Nor can one blame those readers: the book reads for all the world as if Godwin’s *Political Justice* (1793) had been written forty years before its time, and by a man of genius. Burke thus suffered the extreme mortification of finding that he had actually published a powerful political tract in favor of the other side!

This was the pattern throughout the eighteenth century: where intellectual resistance was offered to the Enlightenment at all, it met

with ignominious defeat, its very weapons backfiring against the users of them. As a result, and increasingly as the century went on, dejection settled over the camp of the resistance. In the mid-1790s, of course, *practical* resistance to the Enlightenment became, in England especially, a popular pleasure and a patriotic duty. But well before that time, the intellectual resistance had become virtually paralyzed. There is a striking illustration of this paralysis in the reception that was given to David Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, published posthumously in 1778.

This book was, at the time, the most powerful attack on religion ever published. It still is. Its target was not any particular doctrine or doctrines of the Christian religion: miracles (for example), or immortality, or transubstantiation. Its target was religion at its bare minimum: "natural" religion, the religion to which even people like Voltaire and Thomas Paine still adhered, religion even after it had been freed from all the absurdities of Revelation. Hume's own friends, most of whom still retained some tincture of religion, were frightened of this book, and they forbade him to publish it while he lived. The defenders of full-blooded Christianity were simply terrified by it. The result was that, though the book might have been expected to produce twenty prompt replies, it in fact produced nothing at all, except a universal agreement to pretend that it did not exist. There is not, as far as I know, a single printed mention of this book in English during the eighteenth century.

So hopeless, then, late in the eighteenth century, did intellectual resistance to the Enlightenment appear to be. Yet, out of the blue and against all odds, the resistance scored a resounding success when Malthus published *On Population*. Though a political tract, it is a severely intellectual one: there are no declamations in it, either against Paris mobs and regicide atheists, or in praise of "merry England" and "the Church by law established." It is equally free from irony, *reductio ad absurdums*, and all other literary devices dangerous to their users, and dangerous to conservative writers especially. The book is utterly prosaic, direct, and detached, though tinged with sadness about the state of imperfection in which it has pleased God to place us. It simply claims to point out a fatal obstacle to all hopes of human happiness being greatly and permanently increased. The effect of the book was both immediate and long lasting: it took the wind out of the Enlightenment's sails for fifty years. Science itself, it

seemed, had pronounced judgment against all those who had presumed to make a science of happiness, or a religion of science.

* * *

Thomas Robert Malthus was born in 1766 and died in 1834. He was an Anglican clergyman, in comfortable circumstances and, like his father, lived most of his life quietly in the country. But he was the very antithesis of the rustic eighteenth-century Tory parson. In most respects, indeed, the Malthus family were Enlightenment people themselves. They belonged to that provincial middle-class Whig intelligentsia which was to prove so prodigiously influential in nineteenth-century Britain. (The Darwins are only the most obvious of many examples.) Malthus' father, in fact, was an ardent believer in the perfectibility of man, and so little opposed to innovation that in 1766 he tried to secure the services of Rousseau, then in England, as a future tutor to his newborn son! But by the mid-1790s of course, the skies had darkened. Malthus, like every other sensible and decent person in England, was badly frightened by recent events in France.

The intellectual antecedents of those events were obvious enough, and Malthus' immediate target was one which (as the saying is) "selected itself." It was William Godwin's book, *An Enquiry concerning Political Justice* (1793). This was the book which changed the life of William Wordsworth, and of countless other young men and women who, with Godwin's help, saw in the French Revolution a glorious dawn. Godwin, (the husband of Mary Wollstonecraft and, as a result, the father of Shelley's second wife), was personally averse to physical violence and popular tumults; but then, this characteristic is not uncommon among writers whose books incite other people to precisely those things.

For Malthus, however, Godwin's book was only a convenient local starting point. His real target was the whole mass of utopian ideas which had been issuing from France for decades, and out of which Godwin's book had grown. As his main specimen of this mass, Malthus took Condorcet's *Progrès de L'Esprit Humain*, published posthumously in 1795.

Condorcet was a philosopher, a mathematician, an aristocrat, and above all a "Friend of Humanity": in short, an exceedingly danger-

ous man. But certain still more dangerous men, who ruled France at the time, and who were even firmer Friends of Humanity, outlawed him and hunted him down, and he died in prison in 1794. In fairness to those men, however, it should be said that Condorcet would almost certainly have done the same to them, if things had worked out a little differently. He was no Jacobin, indeed; but what conscientious Friend of Humanity could hesitate to remove an individual obstacle (or two) to the future happiness of the entire human race? Condorcet actually wrote his book while he was in hiding from “revolutionary justice.” The goons finally got him, but the government loved the book, as distinct from its author, and actually published it itself the next year.

The book is, indeed, “an essence almost too fine”: the most perfect possible compendium of utopian-revolutionary absurdities. In other words, almost everything in it would now seem not only true but platitudinous, and the rest would seem reactionary, to the readers of the *New York Times*, the *Guardian* in Britain, or the *Sydney Morning Herald*. It is easy, though not very interesting, to summarize it.

The past is one long hideous night of oppression, greed, cruelty, ignorance, superstition, fanaticism, and imposture, with priests and kings to blame. (To update, substitute “capitalists,” “whites,” “males,” etc., to taste.) But then somehow—it is not clear how, or rather it is, in Condorcet’s treatment, an absolute mystery how, but anyway somehow—in Europe, a few years back, *light dawned*. And this light is soon going to spread everywhere, and irreversibly. Our descendants will all be happy, healthy, free, equal, just, rational, leisured, and cultivated. Condorcet does not actually say that Enlightenment is going to cure wooden legs, though I think it would have pained him to hear it denied. He does say that the length of human life will be indefinitely increased. He never faces, as even ancient Greek fable had faced, the Tithonus-problem: extension of life without reprieve from aging. But no doubt he would have said that, in the future, the progress of medical science will etc., etc.

Malthus, on the other hand, believed that human beings had been placed by God in a state of imperfection which, while they are on earth, is altogether inescapable. He meant imperfection both as to knowledge and as to happiness: that we *cannot* know nearly as much, or be nearly as happy, as we are apt to imagine we could. But it is

only the happiness-dimension which concerns us here, and Malthus thought he had discovered something which will always prevent human beings from being permanently much happier than they have been in the past: namely, the pressure of population.

One woman and one man could have hundreds of children, if every sperm and ovum could be made to count. Even as things are, some women bear more than thirty children. The number of potential human beings vastly exceeds, therefore, the number of actual ones. Not only that: almost all species of plants and animals *actually* produce far more offspring than can possibly survive and reproduce in turn, and man is no exception to this rule. Immense “infant mortalities” in the broad sense, that is, numbers of offspring which die without reproducing, are the rule, not the exception, throughout the animate world.

Since the potential human population is so vast, and even the actual number born so much exceeds the number who survive and reproduce, there must be, Malthus says, powerful “checks” to population which are constantly at work. What are these checks?

There are basically two, he replies: vice and misery. Under the former heading, Malthus reckons adultery, prostitution, contraception, infanticide, homosexuality, polygamy, etc.: in fact, everything to do with sex, other than Christian marriage. Misery, he says, has three main sources: war, pestilence, and famine. It is the last named of these three checks to population which is the strongest, and the only one which is constantly in action. (It may be advisable to say that “famine,” as Malthus uses the word, admits of indefinitely many degrees: it does not mean only a state in which there is no food at all.)

Thus, Malthus says, it is the limitedness of the food supply which does most to limit human numbers. Any serious shortage of food is something which will always quickly cure itself, in a direct and obvious way: people will simply die early, until an equilibrium is restored between human numbers and the supply of food. This, no doubt, was always obvious, or at least plausible, enough. Malthus’ original contribution was the proposition, which is indeed much less obvious, that any great *abundance* of food is also something which will always quickly cure itself. For food will then be cheap, and this will lead, even within a year, to a large increase in the number of mouths to be fed. In a few years more—as few as fifteen years more in the extreme case—those new mouths will be parents themselves.

So quickly will equilibrium between human numbers and the food supply be restored. At any time, then, human population either already is, or soon will be, exactly as large as the supply of food permits.

This is the essence of Malthus' theory: not the proposition which he at first advanced, that population tends to increase geometrically, while food supply can at best increase arithmetically. That proposition invited, and received, criticism, which in time induced Malthus to modify it beyond recognition. It is now deservedly forgotten.

A more important misunderstanding, and one which is still extremely common, is to suppose that Malthus' theory predicts some *crisis* in the affairs of humanity, or of nations or other sub-populations of the whole, once certain circumstances arise: for example, once all the arable land has finally been brought under cultivation. The truth is exactly the opposite: in the history of human population, as Malthus sees it, there are no singularities of any kind. His theory is a *steady-state* theory: it says that human population—however small or great, sparse or dense—is *always* the maximum which the supply of food permits, or else is below that maximum only briefly.

It was this idea, that population, in man and in all other species of organisms, presses remorselessly on the means of subsistence, which gave Darwin (and Wallace) the clue they had been looking for high and low. That there has *been* evolution, or “descent with modification” as they said then, was sufficiently clear even by about 1835: the fossil record could not be explained in any other way, nor could comparative anatomy, or embryology. But no one had been able to think of a *vera causa*, or (as we would say) a mechanism, capable of bringing evolution about. Every naturalist, every breeder, even every gardener, knew and always had known that *variation* is universal: no two peas in a pod, no two pups in a litter, are ever exactly alike. But this fact, on its own, is quite uninteresting. Once we *combine* it, however, with Malthus' idea of the pressure of population, we have—well, dynamite, and a mechanism which *would*, or at least could, bring about evolution.

No two peas, no two pups, are exactly alike: some possess natural advantages which others lack. But there are always *too many* peas, and *too many* pups, for them all to be able to survive and reproduce in turn. So there must be competition among them for the means of

subsistence. Advantageous characteristics will, by inheritance, accumulate in a “favoured race” (of peas or whatever). And eventually this race will be so different from the ancestral type it will be a new species.

It was this conjunction, of the Malthusian idea of population-pressure with the fact of variation, which was the fertilized egg of modern biology. And by now, of course, Malthusian ideas are so central to our neo-Darwinism that it is usual to find superior biological fitness actually *defined* in terms of a superior rate of reproduction.

Darwin acknowledged his debt to Malthus in the first edition of *The Origin of Species* (1859), and the importance of Malthus’ book on its biological side has never been underestimated since then. I believe, however, that it has been much overestimated, and most of the remainder of the present essay will consist of objections to Malthus’, and Darwin’s, biology.

Malthus’ reputation on its other side—as a critic of utopian schemes for abolishing poverty and inequality—has had a very different history. His influence in this capacity was extremely great up to about 1875; but since then it has been virtually non-existent. Yet his earlier reputation was fully deserved: his *Essay* contains arguments of great and permanent value against communist, “welfarist” and other philanthropic political schemes.

* * *

It may be true of animals and plants in general, that any population or community in which both sexes are present is always as numerous, or soon will be as numerous, as its supply of food permits. Indeed, as far as I know, this *is* true; and if it is, then it is a truth which Malthus first suggested. But it is obvious that the same thing is *not* true of all human populations or communities in which both sexes are present. Consider, for example, the student population of a western university in 1990; or again, a community of the nineteenth-century American Christian-communist sect who called themselves Shakers. The Shakers practiced complete sexual abstinence; our students do not. But the student population shows no tendency to reproduce up to the numbers which its food supply would permit, and a Shaker community did not reproduce at all.

Perhaps it will be thought that students and Shakers are not fair examples of human populations. Nowadays, of course, there are people whose sole subject of study is the *total* human population. It might therefore be imagined, by someone who had not read Malthus, that total human population was the sole subject of his theory too. But anyone who *had* read Malthus could not possibly make this mistake. The population of the globe, it is safe to say, was almost never in his mind at all. Besides, his theory, if it *had* been about the total human population and no other, would have been a very uninteresting one. For it was (as we have seen) a steady-state theory and it does not follow, if human population is always in a steady-state *globally*, that it is so in every special or local sub-population. This no more follows than it follows that if half of all humans are male, then (say) half of all mothers are male. The theory would therefore say nothing at all about any human population less than the whole.

Whereas in fact, of course, Malthus' theory is not uninteresting, and *does* say things, indeed any number of things, about special or local sub-populations of humans. For example, it says that people who are under less pressure from famine, war, and disease, will have more children, on the average, than people under more pressure from those things. This is a characteristically Malthusian proposition if ever there was one, and it is plainly a proposition about special human subpopulations.

But it is also a false proposition. If, in a given nation, one class is less exposed than another to famine, war, and disease, it is not true in every case, or even in general, that the former class is the more fertile of the two. In fact the very opposite is the general rule. A class of people usually becomes *less* fertile, the *more* it is exempted from misery due to war, famine and disease. Left to themselves, a large proportion of an ultra-privileged class quickly becomes sexually vicious in Malthus' sense, or sexually ascetic, or sexually incapable. The class overall becomes, as a result, distinctly less fertile than the mass of the population which is not thus privileged.

These facts are, surely, obvious enough: "the life styles of the rich and famous" are not in general distinguished by unusually large numbers of offspring. Even so, it is likely to be objected that Malthus' theory does *not* say that people are more fertile, the less miserable they are; that it only says this will be so *if other things are equal*. That is certainly more plausible; but let us think what it comes to at

Malthus' hands. According to him, the only main check to population, other than misery, is vice. The suggestion would therefore come to this: that if two classes of people are equally vicious—that is, equally given to prostitution, or contraception, or homosexuality, or whatever else falls outside Christian marriage—then the less miserable of the two classes will be the more fertile.

Even this proposition still gets things exactly the wrong way round, it seems to me, because the tendency of prosperity to inhibit fertility is so strong. Still, I am not at all confident of its falsity. How could anyone possibly be confident of the falsity, or the truth, of a proposition at once so complex and so open ended as this one? If it saves Malthus' theory from obvious falsity, it does so at the cost of plunging it into hopeless uncertainty. It is not even clear whether the only case it contemplates is even a possible one: the case, that is, of equal vice but unequal misery. Vice and misery, in Malthus' sense, are certainly not "independent variables," nor did he think them so. He believed, and surely rightly, that vice is often a *cause* of misery, and misery often a cause of vice.

In any case, neither Darwin nor any other rational person would ever have dreamed of erecting a system of biology on a proposition so precarious as the one I stated a moment ago. Darwin, Wallace, Greg, Galton, and all other parties to the discussion of Malthus, took him to be advancing a much simpler and more categorical proposition. This is my excuse for having done the same.

It is simply not true of human populations, then, that their numbers are always as great, or soon will be as great, as their supply of food permits. But this is not a fact which takes much away from the debt which Darwinian biology owed to Malthus. For (as I have said) his steady-state theory of population *is* true—as far, at any rate, as I have been able to learn—of all species of animals other than man, and of all species of plants. Even if it is not true without exception even of them, it is true so very generally, and is an essential part of the explanation of so many biological facts, that its falsity in the case of *Homo sapiens* is a very minor debit in the overall account.

But even as to humans, Malthus' theory is at least a good approximation, and an important near-truth, with respect to one class: the poor. Speaking by and large, the poor, at all times and places, *have* bred up to the limit imposed by their food supply. Nor are the reasons for this fact far to seek. The poor in general are more improvi-

dent and ignorant than those who are not poor, and they live more crowded together, while sexual intercourse is one of the few sources of happiness to which poverty is no bar.

Then we have also to recall the fact that most of the humans who have ever lived *have been* poor. This fact, combined with the others just stated, is no doubt the reason why on the whole, and in the long run, human numbers almost always *do* increase. And they are facts which compel us to acknowledge, as a real pressure even in the human case, Malthus' "pressure of population on the means of subsistence."

* * *

The Malthus-Darwin theory of man is exposed to another objection which has often been urged, but has never (as far as I know) been answered. The theory says that evolution depends principally upon natural selection, and that natural selection depends upon competition, brought about by the pressure of population, for the means of subsistence. But now, who or what is it, in the human case, that competes? What is the "unit" of competition.

The answer cannot possibly be "every single human being." There must always have been a great deal of co-operation, rather than competition, between *generations*, at least. Mothers' milk is a splendid "means of subsistence," but if mothers or fathers had competed with babies for it, there would soon have been no babies. Then, there must always have been much co-operation between the *sexes*. The burden of gestation, parturition and care of the newborn falls entirely on women, and if a woman so heavily burdened had had to compete for food with her mate or other adult males, she would infallibly have starved.

Perhaps, then, the unit of competition was mum-dad-and-the-kids? But it is hard to think of a less competitive unit than this one. Have you ever tried to catch fish with young children around? Such a unit could never have competed successfully with a stray bachelor, widower, or any adult male temporarily or permanently unencumbered by mum-and-the-kids.

Was it just the adult males, then, who did all or most of the competing? Suppose that it was so, and then consider any three men taken at random. The differences among them in strength, speed,

intelligence or whatever will hardly be so great as to prevent co-operation between any two being more than a match for the third. Hence co-operativeness between men, if it has any genetic basis at all, as it is reasonable to suppose it has, must have quickly swept through the gene pool.

All right: we now have a great deal of co-operation, rather than competition, between parents and children; between men and women; and between men. So where, and with what as units, is the supposedly universal Darwinian *competition* ever going to begin? That it ended immeasurably long ago, if it ever began, not even Darwin disputed. But what reason is there, apart from Malthus' false theory, to believe that it ever existed? And though this problem is at its most pressing in the case of man, it will be obvious that it extends beyond that case. The absolute necessity of co-operation between generations and between sexes, and the extreme advantageousness of the co-operation between adult males, hold good for wolves and elephants as much as for humans.

This objection to Darwin and Malthus has often been advanced, as I said, and has been strongly felt far more often still. It is a particular favorite with the many people who believe that Darwinian biology was improperly used, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to justify *laissez-faire* economic policies at home, and colonial expansion abroad. The most famous and elaborate version of the objection, accordingly, is the book *Mutual Aid* (1902), by the anarchist Peter Kropotkin. He was outstanding, even among enlightened persons, for invincible silliness and optimism; for example, only his actual experience of Bolshevism ever enabled Kropotkin to perceive any merits in the previous Russian autocracy. Nevertheless, on this matter of the *role* of competition in human evolution, Kropotkin's biology was better than that of the professed biologists.

The Malthus-Darwin theory requires, as the motor of evolution, ruthless competition for the means of subsistence, yet in the human case it seems that there never was, and never could have been, such competition. This is an objection (I should emphasize) to the Darwinism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is not an objection to which the neo-Darwinism of the present day is exposed.

The reason is that neo-Darwinians recognize that competition for food is only one of many forms of competition among organisms.

In marked contrast, neither Darwin nor Wallace ever clearly distinguished between “the struggle for *life*” and “the struggle for *the means of subsistence*,” that is, food. As a result, they brought about a widespread belief that competition for food is the basic, or even the only, form of competition. They did so entirely against their own better knowledge, of course. They both recognized, in some contexts, other forms of competition: for example, competition-to-avoid-being-made-food. Darwin even tried, in *The Descent of Man*, to compel recognition of a form of competition quite unrelated to food: competition among male animals for acceptance by females. But Wallace and other rigid Darwinians would not hear of it, and denied the very existence of sexual selection. Nor was Darwin in any position to complain about this. No reader of chapter three of *The Origin of Species*, “The Struggle for Existence,” could possibly carry away from it a clear distinction between the struggle for existence and the struggle for food. It was, therefore, on very good authority that Tennyson, and almost everyone else, came to believe that nature is “red in tooth and claw.”

This blindness of nineteenth-century Darwinism towards forms of competition other than competition for food is so anomalous as to call for explanation. I suggest that the explanation lies in the well-known fact that both Darwin and Wallace, at a critical moment in their intellectual development, read Malthus’ *On Population*. For that book *was*, of course—once you stop to think about it—almost entirely about food, and about the pressure which the supply of food is always under.

Although neo-Darwinism does not face the problem which Darwinism did of finding humans who compete for food with anything like perfect ruthlessness, it does face an analogous problem, and faces it on a far wider front. For just as biologists a hundred years ago encouraged their readers to believe that all competition is (“ultimately”) competition for food, so biologists nowadays, though they acknowledge the multiplicity of forms of competition, encourage their readers to believe that all competition is (“ultimately”) competition-to-reproduce. But the same kind of problem recurs. It is just as hard to find, among actual organisms, perfect demons for reproduction, as it is to find, among actual humans, perfect demons for food consumption. It was therefore a welcome suggestion that Professor Richard Dawkins made in *The Selfish Gene* (1976) that it is not organ-

isms at all, but *their genes*, which are the ideally selfish reproducers, and the competitors whose competition is the real motor of evolution.

But the course of true selfishness never did run smooth. Professor Dawkins himself soon acknowledged that genes—actual genes—do not come up to the ideal of being maximally selfish reproducers any more than actual organisms do. It is only certain small parts of genes, he says, which really do so.¹

There is an obvious danger, however, that Professor Dawkins will find that these parts in turn are not as diligent in reproduction as they might be, and that he will then conclude that they too, like organisms and whole genes, are just another smoke-screen behind which the really selfish reproducers are tirelessly at their work. William Bateson used to say that genetics is scientific Calvinism, but Professor Dawkins carries this half-joke altogether too far. Like the seventeenth-century Christian demonologists who searched for “succubi,” and the twentieth-century socialist demonologists who search for “Zurich gnomes,” he searches for beings which are immoral, hidden, and omnipotent. But common sense says that omnipotence, or perfection of any kind, is not to be looked for in this world.

* * *

Malthus' arguments against schemes for abolishing poverty, inequality and unhappiness generally, are set forth best in editions of his *Essay* after the first. Although they are extremely powerful arguments, there is a certain absurd exaggeration of them which Malthus is repeatedly guilty of: a certain “overplaying of his hand,” though his hand was in no need of overplaying. It may be as well to point out this uncharacteristic fault here, and to get it out of the way.

According to Malthus, the most inveterate and widespread mistake about population and food is that this is a problem of *the future*. He is always returning to attack this belief, which was shared, of course, by Condorcet and Godwin among many others. Godwin had acknowledged that, *ultimately*, the pressure of population might bring his future utopia undone; but that time, he said, if it ever came, was “myriads of centuries” away.

Malthus, however, writes that “if Mr Godwin's System of society was established in its utmost perfection, not thirty years could elapse,

before its utter destruction by the simple principle of population.”² Nay, he goes on to say, the “difficulty ... is really not thirty years, or even thirty days, distant from us.”³ It is “imminent and immediate.”⁴ “[The] period when the number of men surpasses their means of easy subsistence has long since arrived”⁵ Indeed, Malthus says, Godwin’s system of society could not exist for one second: “The same causes in nature which would destroy it so rapidly, were it once established, would prevent the possibility of its establishment.”⁶

In short, the “difficulty” about population and food is not a future problem: it has existed for thousands of years, and it exists *now*. These are things which Malthus *must* say: for his theory is, as I have said, a steady-state theory. But they are also things which expose him to a very obvious, and a fatal, retort: “*What are you worried about, then?* Why are you frightened of revolutionary utopians, if, as you say, natural causes prevent the realization, even for one moment, of their schemes? What dire consequence of those schemes are you pointing out, except that population would then press with the utmost severity upon the food supply? But this is a state of affairs which, according to you yourself, exists *already and always*, except during the first ‘peopling’ of a territory.”

It is quite impossible to defend Malthus against this criticism. The best that one can truthfully say is that he is far from being the only writer on population who has been guilty of this kind of absurdity. We have all read, or read of, economists who start from a Malthusian or steady-state theory of population and who nevertheless pretend to derive from it a prediction of some giant singularity impending over us: an unprecedented “world food crisis,” or “universal famine,” in the year 2000 A.D., or whenever. That others have been guilty of the same thing is only a poor defense of Malthus, of course; and it is made even poorer by the fact, which is undeniable, that it was he who *began* this particular form of illogicality.

* * *

Malthus appears never to have had a personal enemy; in fact he was liked and respected by everyone who knew him. Among the Friends of Humanity, however, as Harriet Martineau, Francis Place, and many other contemporaries attest, his book made him the most detested man in Britain. Among such people, it has remained an

object of detestation to the present day. Marx, as is well known, regarded Malthus as one who had written “in the interests of the ruling classes, whom [he] adored like a true priest.”⁷ And this kind of estimate of Malthus is the one which is still most current among the enlightened.

It is obvious enough why Malthus’ book aroused the hostility it did. For it said, in effect, to working people, “you should restrain your sexual impulses and marry late.” This advice would not be positively welcome to many people at any time, and it was not well received by working people in Malthus’ time. But it sounds far worse still, in fact it sounds utterly shocking, to middle-class people whose philanthropic and egalitarian passions are (for whatever reason) in an inflamed state. And to them it is all the more outrageous for having come from a minister of the established religion, living at his ease in a large country house.

Yet Malthus’ reasons for this advice were not obviously false or insufficient, or obviously morally objectionable. They were, in essence, these: “Otherwise, you either must resort to vicious ways of limiting the number of your children; or else you will be miserable, through having more children than you can adequately feed, and you will perpetuate the misery of working people, by making labor plentiful and therefore cheap.”

As reasoning, there is no flaw at all in this, that I can see. If there is a flaw in its *premises*, it is Malthus’ tacit assumption that contraception is as bad as (for example) infanticide. This assumption (I have found by experience) seems bizarre to many people at the present day. But that, I suspect, is only because they take it to mean that contraception is as *cruel* as infanticide; which, it should go without saying, is not what Malthus meant at all. Instead, he meant that efficient contraception is bad in the sense that it is a strong inducement to sexual dissoluteness in general and marital infidelity in particular. And this is a proposition which, if it is false, is at least not obviously so.

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Malthus’ advice to working people arouses no indignation whatever in me. As an Australian, I know rather too much about philanthropic and egalitarian passions, and their effects.

As a philosopher, however, there is one thing about Malthus' book which does arouse my indignation. This is its perpetual blurring of the distinction between matters of fact and matters of value: or, as Hume put it in a famous paragraph of his *Treatise of Human Nature*, of the distinction between "is" and "ought." Malthus' moral values were, as it happens, eminently decent and sensible ones. The trouble is, that he would always pretend that they have also the decisive authority of fact on their side: that they *follow logically* from his scientific "principle of population."

This kind of failing is extremely common, of course. But it is both an intellectual and moral failing. It always depends, as Hume pointed out, on a certain inexplicitness of thought or expression. Suppose that Malthus had thought or written that the proposition, "Poor people should marry late," *follows from* "Population is always at, or briefly below, the maximum which food permits." If he had, he would never have deceived either himself or anyone else, because even a blind man could see that the former proposition does *not* follow from the latter; any more than it follows from " $2 + 2 = 4$." But of course there is none of that kind of explicitness in Malthus' book. His values are always insinuated in the guise of facts.

Notes

1. Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, London: Granada Publishing, 1978, p. 35.
2. See Thomas R. Malthus, *First Essay on Population* (1798), London: Macmillan, 1966, p.208. This is a facsimile edition, first published in 1926, of the first edition of Thomas Malthus' *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798). (The page references in footnotes 3 and 6 are to the same edition.)
3. See Malthus, *ibid.* p. 250. (The italics are not in the text.)
4. This quotation is from an edition of the *Essay* which is stated in the editor's introduction (p. vi) to be "based on the seventh edition" (1872) and published as Thomas R. Malthus, *An Essay on Population* (1798), ed. by M.P. Fogarty, 2 vols., London: J.M. Dent and Sons and New York: E.P. Dutton and Co. (Everyman's Library), 1958, vol. II, p. 1. (Footnote 5 below also refers to this edition.)
5. *Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 4. (The italics are not in the text.)
6. See Malthus, *First Essay on Population* (note 2), p. 210.
7. Karl Marx, *Capital*, (1867), ed. by Frederick Engels and trans. by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1954, vol. I, footnote 1, p. 495.

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5

Population, Privilege, and Malthus' Retreat

Malthus' *Essay on Population* of 1798 was an anti-communist and anti-socialist tract. It claimed to point out a fatal flaw in all proposals for abolishing private property, or for equalizing wealth. The words "communism" and "socialism" do not occur in it, but that was simply because those words did not exist when Malthus wrote. Where we would speak of communist or of socialist political programs, Malthus spoke of "systems of equality": an expression which goes rather more to the heart of the matter (when you come to think of it) than do the expressions we use.

Schemes for community of property or for the equalization of wealth had been pouring out of France for fifty years when Malthus first published his *Essay*. They came from the pens of Mably, Rousseau, and Morelly, among others. In the 1790s such schemes had been powerfully advocated in France by Condorcet and Babeuf, and in England by William Godwin in *Political Justice* (1793), and Thomas Paine in *The Rights of Man* (1792). But Malthus was convinced that communism would replace the existing *comparative poverty of most* by the *absolute poverty of all*, and that it would, in the process, destroy "everything which distinguishes the civilised from the savage state."¹

He was convinced of this, both by an argument from his principle of population, and by certain economic arguments which do not depend on that principle at all. These economic arguments also convinced him that the system of "Poor Laws" which existed in England in his own time—that is, the system of publicly funded unemployment relief—was already a long step towards socialism, and hence towards economic and cultural disaster.

This essay first appeared in 1995.—Ed.

For every one person who has actually read Malthus' *Essay*, there are a hundred people willing to talk or even write about it. This has always been the case, and has often been remarked upon. I do not know why it is so, but one effect which could easily have been anticipated from it has certainly taken place. This is that ridiculous misconceptions about the book become widely and firmly entrenched in people's minds, to a point where it is quite hopeless to dream of ever dispelling them.

One of these misconceptions is that Malthus' *Essay* advocates, either openly or covertly, the practice of contraception. Nothing could be further from the truth than this belief. Malthus was fiercely opposed to contraception, and made this fact sufficiently clear in his book. Yet, on no other foundation than this ludicrous error, a new word came into existence early in the nineteenth century, and remained current for a hundred years: "neo-Malthusian," which meant (when applied to things or practices) "an aid to contraception," and (when applied to persons) "an advocate of contraception." (I should perhaps add that the word "contraception" itself has existed only since 1917.) And though "neo-Malthusian" is no longer in use, almost everyone at the present day who is educated enough to have heard of Malthus at all, "knows" that he was the great apostle of contraception, the St. Paul who brought this saving grace into modern life.

But an even more grotesque misconception about the *Essay* is one of the achievements of the twentieth century. This is the belief that Malthus, with wonderful prescience, had written his book in order to warn humanity of the catastrophic "over-population" which was even then impending over us, and which is now—because we have failed to heed his warning—about to descend upon us. There are literally millions of people nowadays who believe this, even if they believe nothing else about Malthus.

Yet even someone who had never read Malthus ought to be able to work out that this belief cannot possibly be true. All that such a person would need to know is that Malthus' book had supplied Darwin and Wallace with an essential component of their explanation of organic evolution in general. For suppose it were true, and that Malthus had said that overpopulation threatens our species with universal famine: how could *that* fact have thrown any explanatory light whatever on the evolution of species from other species? An

imminent halving or extinction of our species by starvation would undoubtedly be of practical interest to biologists, as to everyone else; but it is of absolutely no interest from the point of view of general biology. Darwin and Wallace could never have got a vital clue from Malthus, if he had been merely a forerunner of the foolish or ignorant writers of the present day who try to spread panic about "over-population."

In fact this "catastrophist" interpretation of Malthus manages to be just about the exact opposite of the truth. His principle of population is a proposition concerning, not only all species of organisms indifferently, but all *times* indifferently. It not only does not predict any particular "crisis," or other journalistic artifact, in the history of humans and their food: it does not pick out any singularity in time at all in the history of any species. Quite the reverse, in fact: for it says that the relation between a species and its food is, in a certain respect, *always the same*.

The principle is this: that every population of any species is at all times as large as the available food allows, except when it is rapidly approaching that limit after having suffered a check from disease or some other cause, or after recently arriving in a new territory. At those times, the natural tendency to increase is less restrained than it normally is: new supplies of food, or a recent abnormally high proportion of deaths, provide an opening for an abnormally high proportion of a new generation to survive. Thus population "oscillates" (as Malthus is always saying) back to its normal size: that is, the maximum that there is food for.

This is evidently a theory which, so far from predicting any crisis or catastrophe concerning food and population, positively *excludes* such a thing, for any species. It is, rather, what you might call a "steady-state" theory of population and food, or better still a "permanent plenum" theory. Of course it does not rule out the occurrence of famines, which may be of any given degree of severity and extent. But a famine is simply a period in which, from insufficient or inferior food, many members of a given population suffer death or debility at an earlier age than they otherwise would. That there can never for long *be* more people (or flies or whatever) than there is food for, should go without saying, and certainly needed no Malthus to teach us; though one sometimes suspects that our present day population catastrophists (who imagine they are Malthusians!)

believe, precisely, that there *can* be. What Malthus said was the far more interesting proposition (whether or not it is true), that there can never for long be *fewer* people, *either* (or flies or whatever), than there is food for. In other words, the tendency of organisms to increase is so strong that it neglects no opportunity to turn food-for-a-possible person (or fly or whatever) into food-for-an-actual one. Different species have, of course, very different gestation periods, and in most species sexual activity is confined to a certain season; but, subject to these and the like obvious qualifications, population increases *immediately* when food does, and *exactly as much as* the increased food allows. *That* is what Malthus thought.

Yet most populations of organisms, most of the time, in spite of this *tendency* to exuberant increase, in fact increase only slowly or not at all. What, then, are the restraints or checks to population which operate effectually most of the time? In the human case, Malthus replies, the main ones are misery and vice. Human misery has, he says, three principal causes: famine, war, and pestilence, or—in less florid English—food shortage, war, and disease. By “vice,” Malthus meant chiefly the use of “improper arts”² to prevent pregnancy or terminate it artificially; the “barbarous habit”³ of infanticide; and “unnatural vice”⁴ (i.e., homosexuality).

The misery check is common to all species whatever. No organism ever willingly surrenders its life to hunger or disease or an enemy. War is peculiar to man, (or nearly so), but large-scale killing, in the form of predation, is part of the fate of most species of animals and plants. The vice check, by contrast, Malthus says, is peculiar to man. Darwin agreed. The “instincts of the lower animals are never so perverted as to lead them regularly to destroy their own offspring, . . .”⁵ and neither, even if they *were* so perverted as to want to prevent conception, do they have the intelligence needed to succeed in doing so. According to Malthus, the vice check is even peculiar to *civilized* man: “vice [is] out of the question among savages.”⁶ Here Darwin demurred and said, what is true, that Malthus had underestimated the prevalence of infanticide and abortion among savages.⁷ Neither man betrays any awareness of male homosexuality outside civilization, or female homosexuality anywhere.

Such, in outline, was the theory of population and the checks to it which Malthus maintained in his *Essay*, and in which Darwin and Wallace detected a mechanism that would explain how species originate from other species.

The Malthus-Darwin principle of population (I have already said in earlier essays*), is not true, at least with respect to man. But the principle has exercised so enormous an influence on biological thought that it will be worthwhile to expose it to a criticism which, though it again concerns the human case, is a little more subtle than anything that I have said against it so far. The criticism to be advanced in the next few pages is old, having been voiced at intervals during nearly two hundred years. But, for some reason which I do not understand, it has never commanded anything like the attention which, to me at least, it seems obviously to deserve. It concerns the association, or more accurately the lack of association, between fertility and privilege.

It clearly follows from Malthus' theory that, if there are two human populations in which vice is equally prevalent, one will be more fertile than the other if it is less miserable than the other: that is (according to Malthus), if it is less exposed to the misery resulting from food shortage, disease, and war. Or we may say the same thing in terms of one population, at two different times: supposing vice equally prevalent at both the earlier and the later stage, if the population suffers less misery from war, disease and food shortage at the later stage than it did at the earlier, it will then be more prolific of children than it was earlier. In plain English: other things equal, and on the average, people who are less miserable (or more privileged) have more children than people who are more miserable (or less privileged).

But this is not at all what we find in fact, either in history or in our own observations of everyday life. It is more nearly the very opposite of it. The words of a vulgar American song of the 1930s, that

The rich get rich
And the poor get children

come closer to expressing the uniform experience of mankind, than does this consequence of Malthus' theory.

It is quite certain that, in general, the poor are more exposed than the rich to the misery which results from food shortage, war, and disease. They are also less prudent and forward-looking than the rich. They are more ignorant, too, and therefore less able to make

* For example, see "The Malthus Check" in this collection, as well as the first four essays in David Stove, *Darwinian Fairytales*, Aldershot, U.K.: Avebury, 1995.—Ed.

use of such prudence and foresight as they do possess. They have a smaller variety of things to occupy their minds than rich people do, and fewer sources of happiness open to them. They live more crowded together than the rich Who could not easily continue this catalogue of differences? And then, we recall, sexual intercourse is one of the very few sources of happiness to which poverty is no bar. From all these familiar facts, common sense tells us imperatively to expect what we find to be actually the case, that large families are commoner, on the whole, among the poor than among the rich. In other words, that increase of population is more repressed, *not* where food shortage, war and disease fall more heavily, but precisely where they fall more lightly.

Of course, the distinction between rich and poor is not *exactly* the same as the distinction between the privileged and the rest: membership of a privileged class need not be constituted by *wealth*. It may be constituted by inherited rank, by individual military prowess, by religious authority, or by various other things. By any standards, and certainly by Malthus' standards, the Knights Templars in the year 1250, or the Jesuits in 1700, were highly privileged people. Few people at the time were less likely than they were to die of starvation or disease, or to be killed in war. But they were not *rich*, in the sense of having individual command of unusual wealth. Officially, indeed, and certainly in at least very many cases in fact, they had no money at all.

Of course the people who a little later *expropriated* both those privileged orders were convinced that their victims had left behind them, buried somewhere, mountains of gold. But that is merely a characteristic delusion of unscrupulous secularists who are short of cash. Even those expropriators, however, though like all enlightened persons they believed the worst about the official chastity as well as poverty of their victims, were never so stupid as to believe that the Templars or the Jesuits must have left behind them *offspring* proportional in numbers to the degree of privilege which the members of those orders had enjoyed. But that is what they should have believed, and what should have been true too, if Malthus' theory were true.

Go to the extreme case and consider the *most* privileged classes of people that history can show: the people for whom the probability of death from starvation or in battle was lowest, and to whom the

best medical attention of the time was available. Such classes have *never* been prolific of offspring in anything like the degree to which they were privileged. They have never even managed to *maintain* their numbers by reproduction. They have survived, when they have, by early recourse to non-biological expedients: recruitment or adoption.

The offspring of a most privileged class exhibit, in fact, more strongly than those of any other class, and far more strongly than the offspring of the poor, a proclivity towards a whole range of things, every one of which is more or less unfavorable to parenthood. To early sexual exhaustion, to sexual incapacity, to sexual indifference, to homosexuality, to religion, to study, to art, to connoisseurship, to gambling, to drunkenness, to drugs To almost anything in the world, in fact, except increasing or even maintaining the numbers of their own class by reproduction.

There is in Malthus' favor, of course, a certain tendency which privileged men have, to leave more children than unprivileged ones do; for the obvious reason, that they find more women sexually accessible. But there are also other and opposite tendencies which, singly or in combination, for the most part prevent that tendency from achieving very pronounced expression. One such tendency is the higher probability of promiscuous men contracting a sexually transmitted disease inimical to parenthood. Another is the tendency that privileged women have to leave fewer children than unprivileged ones; partly, no doubt, for the equally obvious reason that it is more difficult for men to obtain sexual access to them. Any theory which predicts that exceptionally privileged women, such as Cleopatra, Elizabeth I of England, Catherine the Great of Russia, Queen Victoria, and the actress Elizabeth Taylor, will on average have exceptionally many children would be contrary not only to fact but to common sense. But that is what Malthus' theory predicts. (Those five women in fact average, so far as I can learn, about four children each: certainly not an exceptionally large number.)

Again, we can easily concede to Malthus that a large part of the infertility of the privileged is due, sometimes at least, to their stronger propensity to "vice" in the form of contraception or abortion. But here, too, there are countervailing tendencies. We are apt to be misled, on this subject, by thinking only of middle-class people, in countries like our own during the last hundred years. They, indeed,

have lived under a heavy and increasing cloud of anxiety about the number of children that they can (as they vulgarly say) “afford.” But a rich person is more or less exempt from that anxiety; while an aristocrat despises it, just because it *is* a middle class anxiety. And not only the economic but even the physical burdens of motherhood are far lighter for *highly* privileged women than for others. Once the baby is actually delivered, *the staff* take over the whole of that not very interesting business.

The Malthus-Darwin principle of population, then, when it is applied to man, not only fails to predict the right relation between fertility and privilege, but predicts what is roughly the inverse of it. The incidence of “vice,” in Malthus’ sense, varies in the wildest manner from time to time and from place to place. No sane person will believe, for example, that abortion and contraception were about equally prevalent among the Catholic ruling class of Austria in 1570, the Puritan theocrats of New England in 1680, the Whig lords who ruled England in the mid-eighteenth century, and the Japanese imperial circles of 1935—to take a handful of cases at random. But there is one fact which does emerge from human history with unvarying insistence, and it is a fact which is fatal to the Malthus-Darwin theory: that the natural rate of human increase is repressed the more, *not* where the misery due to famine, war, and pestilence falls more heavily, but precisely where it falls more lightly.

It is always painful, as Huxley said, to witness the brutal murder of a beautiful theory by an ugly fact. The Malthus-Darwin theory of population is certainly a beautiful theory, partly because it comprehends, in one simple biological scheme, the human and all other cases. Nevertheless, and whether or not anyone wants to know, it was brutally murdered, ages before it was born, by an ugly fact about human beings.

* * *

Various authors have made the kind of criticism I have just been expounding of the Malthus-Darwin theory of population. The most recent one I know of (though it would be surprising if he were really the most recent), is R.A. Fisher, in *The Genetical Theory of Natural Selection* (1930).

Fisher had long been puzzled by the question—a very reasonable question too, if you start off by looking at man from a Darwinian point of view—why it is that successful civilizations do not just go on being even *more* successful. Why is it that, instead, they all sooner or later succumb to some less advanced rival? Darwinian biology affords no non-human parallel to this. And Fisher's answer, given in the last five chapters of his book, was as follows. First, that comparative fertility or infertility is to a considerable extent inherited; and second, that advanced civilizations have always practiced a systematic "social promotion of the less fertile."⁸ As a result, they have always experienced a general decline in ability, since the very people whose abilities qualified them to rise in society have always been subjected to a selective pressure to have few or no children.

This theory, whether it is true or not, is at least extremely plausible, and as depressing as it is plausible. Yet it did not lead its author entirely to despair. For Fisher believed that it might yet be possible to create an advanced civilization which is permanent and progressive, by the adoption of certain eugenic measures. In particular, financial encouragements, increasing with the number of their children, should be given to people who—well, to be brief, to people like the author of *The Genetical Theory of Natural Selection*.⁹

The gem of Fisher's theory, as he acknowledged,¹⁰ had been supplied by Francis Galton, in a brilliant piece of historical and statistical detective work nearly seventy years earlier. The question had been, why do British peerages—that is, their direct male lines—expire with the extraordinary rapidity that they do? Galton's answer, published first in an article in 1865¹¹ and later in his book *Hereditary Genius* (1869), has never (as far as I know) been successfully challenged. It was that peers have a fatal tendency to marry an *heir-ess*: someone, that is, whose parents had not managed to produce even one son, and who is herself, therefore, likely to inherit her parents' comparative infertility. It was this markedly non-eugenic propensity of peers, or rather this violently *dysgenic* propensity, which led Galton to call the peerage a "disastrous institution."¹²

Galton was by no means the only person in the 1860s who saw the Malthus-Darwin theory being refuted before his very eyes: who saw, that is, that the people least subjected to food shortage, war, and disease, and least prone to economic anxiety about the number of their children, were reproducing at the lowest rate, instead of at

the highest, as Malthus' theory predicts. One of the others was a writer now entirely though undeservedly forgotten, W.R. Greg. He published criticism of Malthus and Darwin along the lines I have indicated, first in an article of 1868¹³ and later in his book *Enigmas of Life* (1883). Another was no less than A.R. Wallace, who had published articles along similar lines as part of his disagreement with Darwin about man and natural selection. But I have not myself been able to meet with those articles.¹⁴

The honor of having originated this line of criticism belongs, however, to William Godwin. To the very man, that is, against whom more than any other Malthus had originally written his *Essay*, and over whom he is generally considered to have enjoyed a complete triumph. In 1820, Godwin published *Of Population*, which was his long delayed major reply to Malthus. The book was a complete failure, and certainly did not, as a whole, deserve to succeed. But it deserved still less to fail as a whole, because it contained a number of "palpable hits." One was Godwin's remark that if Malthus' principle of population were true, then the English would long ago have become—as they certainly have not become—"a people of nobles."¹⁵ Here, for once, Godwin was concise when he should rather have been copious, instead of the other way about. He may fairly claim to have put Galton, Greg and Wallace, and even more R.A. Fisher, to shame for their longwindedness.

As I said, the line of criticism of which I have been speaking has never received the attention it deserves. It ought to have compelled an early and public admission, by Darwin and all other interested people, that our species, at any rate, does *not* conform to Malthus' principle of population. But nothing in the least like that has ever happened. Have you ever so much as heard before of this Godwin-Galton-Greg-Wallace-Fisher criticism? No, and hardly anyone else has either. It has remained a forgotten by-path in the history of Darwinian biology, and is now known only to a few persons of antiquarian bent.

The response of Darwin himself to the criticism was entirely and depressingly characteristic. He discusses at length the relevant writings of Greg, Wallace, and Galton, in chapter V of *The Descent of Man* (1871). Yet he somehow manages to do so without ever once betraying the faintest awareness that what he is dealing with is an *objection to* his theory. Well, that was Darwin's way. He was temperamentally allergic to controversy, and would always, if he could,

either ignore or else candidly expound a criticism of his theory, as a substitute for answering it. The result might be, and often was, that his own position became hopelessly unclear, or else clear but inconsistent. But then, he did not mind *that* at all!

Greg and Wallace must have felt utterly baffled by this policy of masterly inaction, "confusionismo," and passive resistance on Darwin's part. Wallace had certainly succeeded in letting *other* people know that he disagreed with Darwin about natural selection and man; but it appeared quite impossible for him to let *Darwin* know. And Greg, for his part, had done everything that he could to let Darwin know it was a *criticism* which he was advancing. For example, he had entitled his 1868 article, to which Darwin refers without giving the title, "The Failure of 'Natural Selection' in the Case of Man." How could he possibly have written more plainly than that? But it was all in vain. Criticizing Darwin was like punching a feather mattress.

With Galton and Fisher, the situation is even more puzzling and amazing. For neither of these writers gives any sign of realizing, *himself*, that what he is saying is a *refutation* of Darwin and Malthus. Yet one would have thought it sufficiently obvious that Galton's self-extinguishing peers, exempt from misery and untempted by vice, should by the theory have been not "disastrous," but *impossible*. And equally obvious that, more generally, Fisher's "social promotion of infertility," if a fact, *proves the falsity* of the Malthusian theory of population, on which Darwin's theory of natural selection rested. But, somehow, it was *not* obvious, either to Galton, or to Fisher, or to most of their readers.

I cannot explain this, at any rate beyond reminding the reader of something I said elsewhere*: that Darwinian Hard Men in general, and the eugenists among them in particular—to which class Fisher as well as Galton belonged—are *constitutionally* confused as to whether un-Darwinian aspects of human life are injurious, or impossible. Neither do I see how it will ever be possible, now, for the line of criticism I have been speaking of, to receive the attention it deserves. If R.A. Fisher's powerful intelligence, in what is by general consent the most seminal biological book of the twentieth-century, could not make clear even to himself, let alone to his readers, that if he was right about man then Malthus and Darwin were wrong,

* See "Essay I: Darwinism's Dilemma," in David Stove, *Darwinian Fairytales*, Aldershot, UK: Avebury, 1995, pp. 1-12.—Ed.

it seems entirely out of the question that anyone else should be able to do so.

* * *

Malthus said in the first edition of his *Essay* that human numbers are prevented from increasing at an extraordinary rate—say, doubling in every twenty years or less—principally by food shortage, war, and disease, or by one form or another of sexual vice. It is instructive to imagine this same proposition being expressed in different words, and being published, as Malthus' version of it was, to the world.

It could be expressed as follows:

If at the end of your life it is found that you had fewer children than can be explained by reference to the contingencies of food shortage, war, and disease to which you were exposed, the only explanation worth considering is that you engaged more or less in some form of sexual immorality such as infanticide, abortion, contraception or homosexuality.

Suppose, for a moment, that one entirely agrees with Malthus as to the immorality of infanticide, abortion, contraception, and homosexuality. Even so, would not publication of the statement above constitute some sort of record for insolence?

Think of three people whose reproductive careers, we will suppose, were never affected by food shortage, war, or disease. One is a nun of exemplary character who dies a virgin in fulfillment of her religious vows; another is a suburban housewife who only ever had one child, because she and her husband could not "afford" more; the third is a Don Juan who dies childless only because of his unflagging attention to contraception, abortion, and infanticide. Since we have excluded by supposition the influence of "misery" in explaining these low reproductive careers, we can only, according to Malthus, ascribe them to "vice." He *has* no third category.

There is something almost heroic about an insult as vast and indiscriminating as this. And yet similar things are by no means unknown. We would not need to look far into the literature of neo-Darwinism at the present day to find insults to the human race which would bear comparison with Malthus'. The reason is obvious enough, too. Namely, that a biologist, or anyone who looks at human life exclusively from the biological point of view, is peculiarly likely to blunder into just this kind and scale of insolence.

But suppose—what is more likely—that we do *not* share Malthus' moral convictions about abortion, contraception, and the rest. Put aside all terms of disapprobation, such as “vice” and “immorality.” Let us simply *list* abortion, contraception, etc., as things which do, as a matter of fact, tend to repress human increase, independently of war, pestilence, and famine.

Now Malthus' proposition will again constitute some kind of record, not for insolence this time, but for glaring falsity. For it contains not the faintest hint of recognition that, among humans, such things as pride, prejudice, and prudence are ever among the checks to population. Not one word of acknowledgement of the inexhaustibly many ways in which human beings differ from one another, in respects likely to influence their reproductive career: in interests, abilities, character, tastes, intelligence, information, beliefs, upbringing, circumstances ... ! Nothing but the blank biological fact which is common to us all, and common to pines and flies: that the tendency to increase is checked by food shortage, disease, and large-scale killing. That, plus infanticide and a few other accomplishments peculiar to our species, make up Malthus' whole account of the checks to human increase. It would be worth a good deal to know what his contemporary, Jane Austen, thought of the adequacy of this account.

This was occupying high ground with a vengeance, ground conspicuous for insolence and falsity alike. But Malthus beat a precipitate retreat from this exposed position in the second edition of his *Essay*, published in 1803. Misery and vice, he now says, are not after all the only checks worth mentioning to human increase. There is another one, which he calls “moral restraint.” And this new position is the one which he continued to occupy through all the later editions of the book.

With Malthus, the phrase “moral restraint” does not mean anything like as much as one might expect it to. He explains carefully what he does mean by it. “By moral restraint I would be understood to mean a restraint from marriage from prudential motives, with a conduct strictly moral during the period of the restraint”¹⁶ That is, sexual intercourse being refrained from before marriage, and marriage being postponed until the economic means exist of supporting the children which marriage can be expected to produce.

It may not be obvious at once how very great a retreat Malthus made when he admitted the existence of moral restraint as a check to population additional to misery and vice. But he did not merely acknowledge its existence. From the second edition of the *Essay* on, this newly discovered check occupied very many pages, including whole chapters, of the book. Admittedly, most of these pages were devoted to *recommending* this check, as being preferable to both the misery check and to the vice check. But Malthus also makes ample acknowledgement of moral restraint as a check to population which is *actually and importantly in operation*. He also says emphatically that mere *prudence* is a powerful check to population at the time he is writing, even if the other part of his definition of “moral restraint”—the part about “strictly moral conduct” while marriage is being deferred—is seldom satisfied in fact.

Thus, for example, he writes that although this virtue, of strictly moral conduct pending marriage,

does not at present prevail much among the male parts of society, yet I am strongly disposed to believe that it prevails more than in [less civilised or earlier states]; and it can scarcely be doubted that in modern Europe a much larger proportion of women pass a considerable part of their lives in the exercise of this virtue than in past times and among uncivilised nations. But however that may be, if we consider only the general term [“moral restraint”] which implies principally a delay of the marriage union from prudential considerations, ... it may be considered ... as the most powerful of the checks which in modern Europe keep down the population to the level of the means of subsistence.¹⁷

How perfectly extraordinary! Prudence—a thing which in the first edition had not so much as merited a mention as a check to population alongside misery and vice—is now found to be, not only another such check, but at least in modern Europe, *the most powerful* of all such checks! If it is, how could Malthus possibly have overlooked it when he was first writing the book five years before? And if he was right to recognize it in 1803—as he plainly was—then he must have been profoundly wrong to omit it in 1798.

By making this retreat, Malthus tacitly gave up the premise of his biological argument against Godwin and other communists or socialists. But this was, if anything, a gain rather than a loss; because that argument had always been silly anyway.

The argument had been, in essence, that if private property were abolished, population would press upon the means of subsistence. Yet the very premise of the argument was that population *already*

does press upon the means of subsistence, and does so always and everywhere, in every species of organisms. Malthus was therefore in the position of a worried parent who said to a fractious child, "Stop that, or we will all be breathing air!" or, "If you keep doing that, the sun will rise in the east." You cannot intelligibly threaten or warn a man that he is tending to bring about a deplorable state of affairs, while also saying that that state of affairs always exists, whatever his or anyone's conduct may be. (This absurd aspect of Malthus' argument was pointed out, though not very distinctly, by Godwin himself.¹⁸)

Malthus had other and far better arguments against "systems of equality": economic as distinct from biological arguments, and these are unaffected by his retreat. His economic argument against communism was that where no one could hope to improve their own or their children's economic position, and no one need fear to worsen it, no one would have a sufficient motive to work or save or limit the number of their children. His main argument against "creeping socialism," such as the Poor Law system, was that it *created* the poverty it was intended to relieve: both by economically rewarding those who depend upon the system, and by economically penalizing those who do not. Neither of these arguments, it will be obvious, rests at all on the assumption that population always presses upon the food supply, or on any assumption anything like that.

What is important about Malthus' retreat is that it was an admission, not that the economics of his first edition had been wrong, but that its *biology* had. Wrong, that is, in assimilating the relation between population and food in the human case, to the case of pines, cod, and flies. You cannot consistently say that prudence is a powerful check to increase in the human case, and also say that, in humans as in all other species, population is always as great as the food supply allows; or even that it is always as great as is allowed by the food supply plus the prevalence of vice. Malthus' retreat from this blanket biologism, which he had at first embraced, was to the credit of both his common sense and his character. But it was also fatal to his biology, as well as to his consistency.

It may nevertheless still be true, (as I have already said in earlier essays), that Malthus' principle *does* hold good for all non-human species; or nearly enough hold good, to make that principle a vital clue to the understanding of their evolution. I believe, indeed, that

this is the case. If it is, Darwin and Wallace may have been prompted by a sound instinct, when they took from Malthus' book an *unqualified* principle of population: one which did *not* make an exception of man. All the same, it is ironic that they took this principle from one of the editions of Malthus' book in which the author himself had, very publicly, given it up. *He* had come round to admitting that our species is very different from all the rest; even if Darwin and Wallace had not.

It is sometimes believed that Malthus' retreat was forced upon him by a criticism which his main intended victim, Godwin, had published in 1801. This could easily be true. Godwin's criticism was so short, true, and fatal, that it could easily have brought home to Malthus the insolence and falsity of what he had published in 1798. Godwin simply said that many people are restrained from marriage and parenthood neither by misery nor by vice, but by things like "virtue, pride, or prudence."¹⁹ What a cool current of common sense and human nature, let into the hothouse biological atmosphere of Malthus' first edition!

But I have seen no convincing evidence that his retreat *was* forced by Godwin's criticism; and that supposition is unnecessary. For there are places in the first edition itself at which Malthus both recognizes the existence of "restraint from marriage from prudential motives," and recommends its wider practice. He says on pp. 64-5 of that edition, for example, that such motives already restrain from marriage "a great number" of persons "of liberal education," and he goes on, on pp. 66-9, to recommend this practice to persons who are not in that "rank of life." True, he later says (p.101), with glaring inconsistency, that all the checks to population "may be fairly resolved into misery and vice." But this is only to say that Malthus' inconsistency was not only between his first and later editions, but present in the first edition itself.

The likeliest thing, it seems to me, is that it was Malthus' own common sense which compelled his retreat from the purely biological position which he had taken up at first. After all, pines and flies *cannot* refrain from reproduction on prudential grounds, and it is pointless to advise them to do so; but humans are different. And these facts are so extremely obvious that no one can forget them or by implication deny them. At least, no one can do so for very long; and Malthus had had five years in which to let his common sense

get the better of his bad biology. We see here, incidentally, the superior literary strategy of Darwin. He avoided the necessity of introducing an embarrassing qualification about man into the second edition of the *Origin*, by the simple expedient of saying nothing at all about man in the first.

Notes

1. Thomas R. Malthus, *An Essay on Population* (1798), ed. by M.P. Fogarty, 2 vols., London: J.M. Dent and Sons and New York: E.P. Dutton and Co. (Everyman's Library), 1958, vol. II, p. 261. (This edition is stated, on p. vi, to have been "based on the seventh edition" of 1872.)
2. Ibid., vol. II, p. 161.
3. Ibid., vol. I, p. 141.
4. Ibid., vol. I, p. 113.
5. Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871), second edition, London: John Murray, 1874, vol. I, pp. 69-70.
6. Thomas R. Malthus, *First Essay on Population* (1798), London: Macmillan, 1966, p. 44. This is a facsimile edition, first published in 1926, of the first edition of Thomas Malthus' *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798).
7. See Darwin, *Descent of Man*, p. 69.
8. R.A. Fisher, *The Genetical Theory of Natural Selection* (1930), New York: Dover Publications, 1958, p. 252. And see the following pages to p. 274.
9. Ibid., chapter XII.
10. Ibid., pp. 247-62.
11. In *MacMillan's Magazine*, August 1865.
12. F. Galton, *Hereditary Genius* (1869), New York: Fontana, 1962 (reprinted from the second edition of 1892), p. 187.
13. In *Fraser's Magazine*, September 1868.
14. One of them is given by Darwin, *Descent of Man*, p. 195 as being in *Anthropological Review*, May 1864.
15. W. Godwin, *Of Population* (1820), New York: Augustus M. Kelly, 1964, p. 96. Italics not in text.
16. Malthus, *An Essay on Population* (note 1), vol. I, p. 14.
17. Ibid., p. 315. With respect to moral restraint, the editions of the *Essay* beginning with the second do not differ in any important respect.
18. See pp. 363 and 368 of W. Godwin, *Reply to Parr* (1801), reprinted in W. Godwin, *Uncollected Writings (1785-1822)*, edited by J.E. Marken and B.R. Pollin, Gainesville, FL: Scholars Facsimiles and Reprints, 1968.
19. Ibid., p. 364.

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6

The Diabolical Place: A Secret of the Enlightenment

It was always obvious enough what the main axioms of the Enlightenment were. They were secularism, egalitarianism, and the utilitarian axiom, that the test of morality is the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Many of the theorems too, which evidently followed from one or more of those axioms, were well recognized all along: such theorems, I mean, as republicanism and anti-clericalism. Certain other theorems, for example universal suffrage, took a long time to be recognized *as* theorems of the Enlightenment, even by the Enlightened themselves. But there was one theorem which the Enlightened, though they recognized that it followed from their axioms, felt obliged to keep secret from the public for more than a hundred and fifty years, and which remained almost unmentionable until the lifetime of many people who are still living today.

The theorem I mean had no name, but we now call it contraception; and I can best begin the story of this secret theorem by pointing out that the word itself is a twentieth-century neologism. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* it dates only from the year 1917. Likewise, its synonym “birth control,” which was at first more popular, dates only from 1914. Do not these dates themselves speak volumes? Imagine if there had been no such word as “equality,” or “republic,” until 1914! But contraception, though its derivation from the axioms is not as obvious as that of some other theorems, *was* an Enlightenment theorem all along.

This essay first appeared in 1990.—Ed.

Secularism condemns marriage vows, along with all other vows, oaths, and promises, as being relics of superstition. The greatest happiness axiom condemns clerical (and almost any other) celibacy. For these reasons, the Enlightenment had always promised an immense future increase in sexual gratification. But universal sexual emancipation, on its own, would be sure to have an effect directly contrary to “the greatest happiness”: namely, too many hungry or unhealthy or neglected children.

There are only four possible ways of preventing that result: infanticide, abortion, sexual abstinence, and contraception. The first three are condemned, again, by the greatest happiness axiom, but that axiom does not condemn contraception. When you are comparing amounts of happiness, you have to take into account future people as well as present ones; but you do not have to take into account merely *possible* future people. *Ergo*, contraception is what Enlightenment prescribes.

At least as early as Condorcet, the leaders of the Enlightenment saw this derivation perfectly clearly, even if not all their followers did. They simply took care to say nothing about it in their books. Even in Condorcet’s last book, *Progrès de L’Esprit Humain* (1795), which he knew would be published only after his death, if at all, his closest approach to the subject of contraception is as follows. In the future, “men will know that, if they have a duty towards those who are not yet born, it is not to give them existence but to give them happiness; their aim should be to promote the general welfare of the human race, ... rather than foolishly to encumber the world with useless and wretched beings.”¹

Surely this is a very indistinct way of recommending contraception to one’s readers? It could equally well be a recommendation of abortion, or infanticide, or sexual abstinence. Thousands of people must have read this passage without realizing what it meant; I know I did, more than once. But it was a different story in some of the manuscripts which Condorcet left unpublished at his death. Here he was as explicit and copious about contraception as he had been cryptic and brief in print. He discusses the philosophy, the history, the current technology, and the future social effects of contraception. One such effect, he says, will be to reduce sexual dissoluteness in general, and marital infidelity in particular.²

Condorcet's English disciple, William Godwin, was even more circumspect: there is no allusion, however faint, to contraception in the almost 800 pages of his utopian tract *Political Justice* (1793). In part, this was from pure eccentricity. When it was objected that excessive population would ruin his future utopia, Godwin was unconcerned, and one reason was this: he believed that once people become thoroughly reasonable, as in 1793 they *were* rapidly becoming, especially in France, they would lose all interest in sex.³ This novel "short way" with worries about population was justly ridiculed by Malthus,⁴ but it is unlikely to have been the main reason for Godwin's equanimity about the population of utopia. It is morally certain that the Godwin-Wollstonecraft-Shelley circle practiced contraception themselves: otherwise Shelley's travelling sex circus, which even as it was took several hours to pass a given point, would have stretched from Land's End to John o' Groats. It is therefore probable that it was contraception, rather than sexual indifference, which they really expected to protect their future utopia from the pressure of population.

* * *

Then in 1798 along came "Parson Malthus" (as Cobbett called him) with his sights firmly trained on Godwin, Condorcet, and the rest of the utopian revolutionary tribe. He knew, of course, as all educated people did, of the widespread practice of contraception. But he *was*, after all, a conscientious Anglican clergyman, and it simply never occurred to Malthus to consider contraception in any other light than as one of several vicious "preventive checks to population." ("Preventive" checks he contrasted with "positive" ones, such as war, famine, and disease.) He more than once discusses infanticide, and (in the later editions of the *Essay on Population*) "moral restraint," as checks to population. But he never discussed either contraception or abortion. In Malthus's mind, those two things simply fell under the heading of "improper arts" (as he called them) for limiting population, and he said as little as he could about subjects so repugnant.

His *Essay* was a political tract, but it succeeded in doing what political tracts hardly ever do: it actually changed the minds of very many of its readers. It even changed many people's politics, but there was a far greater number still of people whom it convinced of

the following proposition: that human population, at any rate among the poor, always increases up to the limit permitted by the available supply of food.

This proposition is, of course, only a factual or scientific one, even if it is true. What *practical* conclusion is to be drawn from it is a different question. The conclusion which Malthus drew from it, and expected everyone else to draw too, was simply this: that the poor should marry late.

Among the people whom Malthus convinced of his factual proposition, however, were the contemporary British leaders of the Enlightenment: the utilitarian philosophers Jeremy Bentham, James Mill, and their numerous and influential followers. And all *these* people, naturally enough, drew from that same proposition a practical conclusion very different from Malthus': namely, that the poor should be taught the necessity, and the methods, of contraception.

This group of people soon came to be called "neo-Malthusians," a name which naturally (and rightly) distressed Malthus. Nor did the name assist the popularity of those to whom it was applied. Among those who knew him personally, Malthus was an exceptionally well-liked man. But his book was exactly the reverse, and it has been truly said that, by the 1820s, his name in any form had been "spitten upon by almost every decent and religious-minded man or woman in the country"⁵ as being a cloak for indecency, or for reaction, or both.

But the neo-Malthusians had another public relations problem even more serious than that of their name, for while they were convinced of the urgent necessity of contraception, they were too frightened to say so in public. They considered themselves already embattled enough, simply from being utilitarians, and therefore suspected (rightly) of republicanism, irreligion, etc. For them to advocate and teach contraception in public would have meant incomparably greater odium still. There had been no precedent for such an enormity in fifteen Christian centuries, not even among the wildest men of the French Revolution; and the neo-Malthusian thinkers were hardly the people to break such a silence.

Their master, Bentham, was a timid, rich, scholarly recluse. He would (and did) draft on request a new constitution for Mexico, or whatever, but the stormy waters of home politics were entirely out of his line, even on subjects which were mentionable. James Mill

was not rich, and had had to struggle for decades to get his respectable job at the East India Company, which he would have instantly lost if he had openly advocated contraception. Was their disciple George Grote, a city banker, to ruin himself and his bank by such advocacy? Was Sir Francis Burdett, whose life was devoted to proving that you could be respectable though a Radical, to forfeit his seat in the House of Commons, as another M.P. actually did, by an injudicious speech in favor of contraception? Were factory girls to be lectured on the prevention of conception by that “very ladylike person,” as someone rightly called him, John Stuart Mill?

No. Such things were completely out of the question. The most that the leaders of neo-Malthusianism dared to do was to publish occasional, brief, and obscure hints in favor of contraception, like the one I quoted above from Condorcet. Thus James Mill, for example, in an article in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in 1820, wrote that a solution to the problem of pauperism would not be hard to find, “if the superstitions of the nursery were discarded, and the principle of utility kept steadily in view,”⁶ which must be admitted to be a sufficiently guarded way of recommending contraception. Even his son, although the subject of population never ceased to weigh on his mind from the time he first read Malthus, contented himself in print with saying things like the following: that the future happiness of the mass of mankind depended upon the “labouring population [practising] a voluntary restriction of the increase of their numbers.”⁷ With *that* minimal utterance, of course, Malthus himself would have entirely agreed. Yet it was as far as J.S. Mill ever dared to go in public.

So, as one of the neo-Malthusians, Richard Carlile, wrote in 1824, there was “in London ... a sort of class, or society, or connection of persons, composed of Physicians, Literati, Political Economists, Members of Parliament, with men and women in the first rank in point of fortunes and titles, so convinced of a redundancy of population as to recommend a means of preventing conception on copulation. The practice, though new to England, they say, is not new to Europe This anti-conception scheme was communicated to me about two years since by a friend.” Carlile says that he had at first argued at length against his friend’s scheme. Then he continues as follows: “But after all that can be said between ourselves, as friends, who is the man that dares to broach the subject to the public? I con-

fess that I dare not ... *my friend answered that he dared to do it!* Aye, and now tells me that he *is* doing it to good purpose.”⁸

Carlile was certainly not a man afraid to publish unpopular opinions. In fact he spent, at different times, a total of nine years in prison, on account of publishing anti-religious writings. There is a tradition, admittedly, that he actually preferred prison to the company of his elderly wife; still, he was clearly a man of courage. Yet the subject of contraception seemed, even to him, to be unmentionable in public. Who then was his friend who *did* dare to break the silence?

* * *

Carlile's friend was Francis Place, who was born in 1771 and died in 1854. Unlike the neo-Malthusian leaders, he was not paralyzed by respectability: he was not rich, a gentleman, an M.P., or even a thinker. Originally one of the London poor, he had built up a substantial tailoring business and, then, in middle life, got his first real education by attaching himself to Bentham and James Mill. Politics was Place's life-long consuming interest. He never became one of the Owenites, or “socialists” as they soon began to be called, but he was always fervidly republican, democratic, and anti-religious. And as a political organizer, he turned out to be a genius. The Reform Bill of 1832, the People's Charter of 1839, the repeal of the laws against “combinations” of workingmen: Place was a key figure in all of these, and a thousand other similar things. For forty years, he played the political system of Britain, in the Radical interest, the way Paganini played the fiddle.

On one subject, though only one, Place was a fanatic: population. Malthus, he never tired of repeating, had been right when he said that the only way to relieve the misery of laboring men was to raise the price of their labor by reducing the supply of it: that is, by laboring men having fewer children. But whereas Malthus had concluded from this that laboring men should marry late, Place regarded that advice as being both impracticable and immoral. His own advice to laboring men was, to marry early if you like, but then practice contraception.

This advice was included in a book about Malthus's ideas which he published in 1822; but in that form, Place realized, his advice was unlikely to reach the people for whom it was intended. So he

soon afterwards arranged for the distribution, in the streets of London, of many copies of a handbill, which gave concrete instructions about how to prevent conception. He expanded this handbill into an article which was published anonymously in Carlile's magazine, *The Republican*, in 1825. The best method of contraception, according to this article, is "a piece of sponge, about an inch square, being placed in the vagina previous to coition, and afterwards withdrawn by means of a double twisted thread, or bobbin, attached to it."⁹⁹

These publications produced a violent reaction, but it was not a public outcry: the shock went rather too deep for that. You could better call it an incry: a silent spasm of pain which ran through the country. Someone described Place's handbill as "diabolical," and this word caught on, and stuck to the handbills and to Place: no doubt because it accurately expressed what most decent people felt about such publications.

It must be understood that Place had not done anything illegal. It was not illegal in Britain then (or since) to advocate contraception, or to instruct people in it; still less, of course, was it illegal to practice it. But this was a world, after all, in which Jane Austen had been dead for only five or six years, and what Place had done was felt to be far *worse* than anything illegal: it was felt to be—well, diabolical.

Are you inclined to smile at that feeling? Well, it is not illegal now to urinate on your parents' graves, say, or to collect photographs of your daughter's face and stick pins through the eyes. These things, and a million others, are not forbidden by the principle of the greatest happiness of the greatest number, either. But what would be the feelings of decent people towards someone who did them?

* * *

Place's publications seem actually to have left the subject of contraception even more unmentionable than it had been before. At any rate, another fifty years passed before anyone else did anything comparably aggressive. There were in that period, indeed, a few publications which advocated and taught contraception. For example, there was *Moral Physiology* (1831), by R.D. Owen; there was a pamphlet entitled *The Fruits of Philosophy* (1832), by a Dr. Charles Knowlton of Massachusetts; and there was *An Essay on Scientific Propagation* (about 1873), by J.H. Noyes. Such publications must have had some

effect on people's practice, but they had little tendency to make contraception more publicly mentionable than it had been before; if anything, they had the opposite effect. Nor is this surprising, when you consider who their authors were.

Robert Dale Owen was a son of *the* Robert Owen, first of the breed of socialist millionaires which has multiplied like rabbits ever since, who exhausted the patience of England, Europe, and America by his endless plunges from one scheme of secular salvation to another. R.D. was his father's son, except that he had received an education: a trifling difference when set against the messianic character which he shared with his father. J.H. Noyes was the founder and director of the well-known Oneida Community in New York State, where private property was abolished, all the women were married to all the men, and stringent eugenic policies were enforced. Contraception was simply another inevitable part of Noyes's communist system.

Unlike those two, Dr. Knowlton of Massachusetts is not otherwise known to fame, but his pamphlet supplied the fuel for the next explosion, in 1876. A Bristol bookseller had reissued this pamphlet, adorned by some indecent pictures of his own choosing, and as a result had been imprisoned for publishing an obscene libel. In London, Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh were then on fire with the Placean combination of philanthropy and hatred of religion, and they saw their chance. They edited and republished Knowlton's pamphlet themselves, minus the offending pictures, offered it for sale, and informed the police of what they were doing. They were duly prosecuted and found guilty, but on appeal, because of a defect in the indictment, their convictions were set aside.

This trial attracted great public attention, and it certainly sold very many copies of the pamphlet. It has often been represented as a great victory for contraception; some people have even attributed to it a decline in the British birthrate which began at about the same time. But as far as I can discover, it was no propaganda triumph, rather the reverse. The defendants seem to have antagonized virtually everyone, including many people whom they had hoped to find, or to make, their allies. There was one especially telling instance of this.

They had tried, first by subpoena and then by request, to get Charles Darwin to appear in court in their defense. No doubt they knew that the least public countenance from *him* would ensure a

famous victory for contraception. They may also have calculated that the grandson of Erasmus Darwin—the friend of Joseph Priestley and of other local friends of the French Revolution—would not be able to resist coming to the aid of embattled Enlightenment. If they did, they calculated wrong.

Charles Darwin was not an impolite man, but he gave Besant and Bradlaugh a very brutal brush-off. He was opposed, he told them, not merely to advocacy of contraception, but to the thing itself. As Besant later reported, “he disagreed with preventive checks to population, on the ground that over-multiplication was useful, since it caused a struggle for existence in which only the strongest and the ablest survived, and that he doubted whether it was possible for preventive checks to serve as well as positive.”¹⁰ Nor was this a case of Darwin rationalizing the distaste which he evidently felt for the defendants: he had expressed the same thought in print some years before, not indeed so brutally, but clearly enough, in *The Descent of Man* (1871).¹¹

This, then, was the reception that Besant and Bradlaugh met with from the very embodiment and idol of European Enlightenment. We may judge from it how warmly they were received in all less Enlightened circles. In 1876, if Darwin was against you, who that mattered could be for you?

* * *

The trial of Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant actually seems, like Place’s irruption long before, to have made contraception an even more unmentionable subject than it had previously been. At any rate, it is quite certain that the silence surrounding contraception was deeper in the last quarter of the nineteenth century than it had been in the first.

Anyone who doubts this should consult biographies of the contraceptionists which were published late in that century, and *The Dictionary of National Biography*. For example, *The Life of Francis Place* was published in 1898 by Graham Wallas, professor of political science at the London School of Economics. It is quite a good book, except that it brazenly shirks the whole subject of contraception. Only four of its (almost) four hundred pages are devoted to Place’s “neo-Malthusianism,” and no reader of those pages would have the faintest idea of what Wallas was talking about, if he did not

know from other sources. (I know, because I was such a reader when I first read them.)

Now, this silence about contraception could no more have happened in a biography of Place published fifty years before 1898, than it could have in one published fifty years after that. But there is an even more remarkable silence in the biography of Bradlaugh which was published by his devoted daughter, Hypatia, in 1894. For she actually manages to give an account of the Bradlaugh-Besant trial, less than twenty years before, which avoids disclosing to the readers what the trial had been about.¹²

The Dictionary of National Biography, in its original form, was in twenty-six stout volumes, which carried British biography up to 1911, and began to appear in 1885. It was the achievement of Leslie Stephen, more than of any other one person, and is a work which it would be merely impertinent to praise: it is simply the most valuable book of reference in existence. It displays, however, certain systematic faults of omission, and one of these which has not (I think) been pointed out before is this: the secrecy which had always surrounded the subject of contraception is here carried far beyond all previous limits. No one could ever learn from the *DNB* that such a thing as contraception existed, much less learn that it was a subject of importance to the nation, and to many of the men and women whose lives the *Dictionary* records.

Anyone can easily verify this, by reading the articles on (for example) Place, Carlile, and Bradlaugh. It is impossible to read these articles without astonishment, at the ease with which the editors can simply abolish even the most enormous and notorious historical facts; or without indignation at the thoroughness with which this abolition has here been carried out on the subject of contraception.

The secret which the *DNB* kept so well was kept even better, on the whole, in the USA than in Britain. In the early years of the twentieth century, Margaret Sanger, the pioneer of contraception in America, sometimes worked as a nurse in the New York slums, attending many women worn out by too many babies and abortions. According to her autobiography, she was not at the time much less ignorant than the mothers she tried to help, but these poor people repeatedly implored her to tell them, or sell them—these were their own terrible words—*the secret rich people had*.¹³

Of course, we all know how hostile the Victorian age was to the publication of sexual details in any form. Nor was there any sudden change in this respect when Queen Victoria died in 1901. *And yet the first contraception clinic opened in London in 1921!* In a few years more, the triumph of contraception was complete and public. The Enlightenment secret was out at last.

So great and rapid a revolution in feeling and behavior cries out for explanation. What was it that enabled the contraception movement, previously so successfully repressed for so long, to enjoy its sudden and complete triumph early in the twentieth century? I do not pretend to be able to answer this question fully. But it is easy to answer it partly, by recalling an aspect of this revolution which is at present virtually forgotten.

Nowadays, contraception is nowhere concealed, and it is practiced virtually everywhere. Yet *even now* it has not been acknowledged *as* a part of the Enlightenment, except sometimes in communist countries. In free countries it has never even been enjoined on citizens as a duty, let alone made compulsory; whereas in China at present, for example, if a couple have one child, any second pregnancy *must* be prevented or terminated. Among us, everyone now does what, for centuries before, only the middle and upper classes did: practice contraception, either from a prudent regard for the number of our dependents, or from a desire to enhance our own sexual opportunities. Contraception among us, in short, is entirely self-regarding, and not at all ideological.

It was not so in the early part of this century. When Marie Stopes in Britain and Margaret Sanger in America “broke the sound barrier” at about the time of the First World War, their movement was strongly ideological. Of course the desire of working-class women to suffer less from unwanted pregnancies was an essential causal factor in the revolution; so was the sympathy of their middle-class patronesses. But then, both of *those* factors had been present for a very long time without producing any revolution in feeling and behavior. A desire to lessen the burdens imposed on poor women by too many babies or abortions is not quite the stuff of which a revolution can be made. For one thing, few *men* feel more than a tepid interest in that matter. To effect a revolution, some much more widespread and urgent emotion must be called on: you need a strong ideological wind in your sails. Now, contraception *did* get such a

wind in its sails early in this century, though it had not had it before, and did not keep it for very long afterwards.

It was not an *Enlightenment* wind, however, or one which would be found congenial at the present day by most of the beneficiaries of contraception. For it was a *eugenic* wind, and more specifically a *racial-eugenic* one.

Marie Stopes and Margaret Sanger achieved the first and most urgent of their movement's goals: relief for women, especially poor ones, from excessive child-bearing. But all the while they were riding the eugenic tiger, which had other and bigger goals in view than the relief of poor mothers. The contraceptionists and their beneficiaries got away unscathed, once *their* goal had been reached, and they proceeded to forget all about the tiger, and about how much of their success had been owing to it. There were certain other people, though, who were less fortunate, and not allowed to forget: most notably, European Jews.

The eugenics movement had been begun in the 1880s by Darwin's cousin and friend, Sir Francis Galton, who also coined the word "eugenics." The movement was later carried on under the energetic leadership of the biologist and statistician, Professor Karl Pearson. In theory the movement was as much concerned with "positive" eugenics, that is, breeding better people, or more of them, as it was with "negative": breeding less of the worse. But in practice, naturally enough, it was negative eugenics which soon assumed overwhelming importance in the eugenists' eyes. For the unemployable, the mentally defective, the carriers of hereditary disease, and the racially inferior displayed an apparently irresistible tendency to *outbreed their betters*. It was this which terrified the eugenists; and the terror which they felt at it, and which they communicated to all Europe and America, made their movement a powerful one.

At first, eugenics and contraception were movements entirely independent of one another. Contraception was still unmentionable when eugenics began; and contrariwise. Bradlaugh, for example, who was still an enthusiast for contraception when he died in 1891, appears hardly to have heard of eugenics. The two movements did not at first find one another personally congenial, either. The eugenists were respectable people (to say the least), while the contraceptionists were not; the latter were feminists, the former anti-feminist; and so on. Still, a confluence of the two movements took place, somewhere

between 1900 and 1920, and it is easy in retrospect to see that they were “made for each other.” Contraception held out to the eugenists what, to their enormous frustration, they had previously been denied: the prospect of putting their policies into practice on a nation-wide scale. And contrariwise, eugenics, as I have said, gave the contraceptionists what *they* had always previously lacked: a cause which far transcended the misery of working-class mothers, and one with a widespread and urgent emotion behind it.

Thus the movement for fewer children became a movement for better ones, and for racially better ones in particular. The eugenists, overcoming some distaste, took contraception on board; the contraceptionists, like most other people, had no distaste for eugenics to overcome, and they greedily embraced their new, powerful, and respectable ally. This embrace cannot be adequately documented here, but it is written everywhere in the literature of contraception in the first forty years of our century. It could easily be illustrated by quotations from Shaw, Wells, Arnold Bennett, J.M. Keynes, and a hundred others, but it will be better if I give a few representative passages from the pioneer contraceptionists themselves. The first of the following passages is from Margaret Sanger; the other two are from the *magnum opus* of Marie Stopes, *Contraception*.

The eugenists wanted to shift the birth control emphasis from less children for the poor to more children for the rich. We went back of that and sought first to stop the multiplication of the unfit. This appeared the most important and greatest step towards race betterment.¹⁴

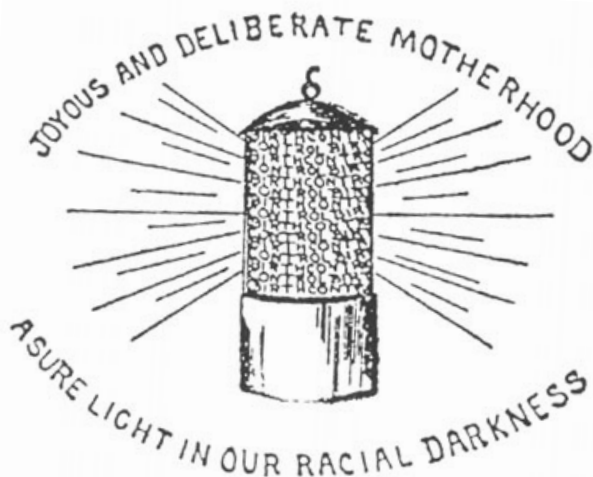
Stopes writes of “the urgent racial problem of dealing with those who from every national point of view ought not to produce the unhealthy and degenerate infants which they are now producing, and who therefore should be sterilised.”¹⁵

Stopes also quotes, with complete approval, Havelock Ellis, saying that contraceptive practices,

as carried on at present, ... may even be dysgenic rather than eugenic, for they tend to be adopted by the superior stocks, while the inferior stocks, ignorant and reckless, are left to propagate freely. This unfortunate result is encouraged by the notorious failure—still so conspicuous amongst us—to spread the knowledge of contraceptives among the classes which from the eugenic standpoint most urgently need them.”¹⁶

Then, at the end of the text of her book, Stopes published the eloquent little drawing, reproduced below, which also appeared on

all the writing paper at her first clinic. It is here slightly enlarged, so as to make the words in the middle—Birth Control—legible.



When the contraceptionists spoke of racial degeneracy, racial betterment, and the like, it is sometimes clear from the context that what they were referring to was the human race as a whole. But at least equally often, it is equally clear that what they had in mind was (something like) “the Anglo Saxon race.” In their writings, they seldom (perhaps never) got right down to details concerning the “fitness” of other races: the intelligence of Negroes, for example. But this omission hardly mattered: their eugenicist allies were in most cases more than willing to supply such details.

* * *

Egalitarianism, as I said at the beginning, was an axiom of the Enlightenment. But if human beings are in themselves all equal, it follows that the inequalities and other differences which we actually find among them must all be due to external causes: to variable accidents, such as their social position, education, wealth, and so on.

“The Characters of Men Originate in their External Circumstances,” as Godwin headed one of his chapters, and as the Enlightened, both before and after him, never tired of repeating. Call this Enlightenment theorem “externalism.” From externalism, along with the undeniable fact that *past* education, past forms of government, etc.,

were such as to leave indefinite room for improvement, a further theorem follows: that all that is needed, to bring about indefinite future improvement in human beings, is improvement in their education, form of government, and so on. This is the Enlightenment theorem of “perfectibilism,” as they used to call it; but I will call it “educationism,” since that name seems to me both more expressive and less embarrassing.

The egalitarian axiom, and its theorems of externalism and educationism, are all obviously false, and always were so. Or rather, to speak plainly, they are and always were simply ridiculous. How could any sane parent of two or more children ever have believed that all children possess equal native endowments of mind and body, or that they will all respond in the same way to the same external circumstances? But then Enlightenment, as we know, is unfriendly towards large families and is easily dissuaded from parenthood altogether. In Britain, for example, the grand total of children produced by Newton, Locke, Hume, Adam Smith, Gibbon, Bentham, J.S. Mill, Macaulay, Buckle, and Lecky, was zero. (I hope it is unnecessary to say that I am not suggesting that these beacons of Enlightenment were themselves egalitarians, even in theory.)

Francis Galton, in *Hereditary Genius* (1869), did valuable service against the ridiculous axiom of equality, and the ridiculous theorems derived from it. He pointed out, for example, the great differences in ability which exist *even among tiny groups of exceptionally able people*—for example, in the mathematical ability of the best Cambridge mathematics graduates in any given year—and which exist, *a fortiori*, everywhere else. And he showed, with irresistible biographical detail, how strong the tendency is for exceptional ability to be hereditary. His most memorable examples were drawn from mathematics and music: the Bach family being the most striking case of hereditary genius in music, the Bernoulli family in mathematics.

Of course, long before Galton, countless people of common sense had noticed that musical and mathematical ability are strongly hereditary. Yet that hero of the Enlightenment, Tom Paine, ridiculed the idea of an hereditary legislator, by saying that such a thing was “as absurd as an hereditary mathematician.”¹⁷ Nor was this an individual aberration: it accurately expressed the boundless folly and ignorance of the whole Enlightenment.

If belief in equality, or externalism, or educationism, was ridiculous before Galton, it was even more ridiculous after him. What word is there, then, to describe those beliefs *after Mendel, de Vries, and William Bateson*? Yet again: how is one to describe those beliefs *now*, when human genetics has existed for nearly a hundred years? The word “ridiculous” is clearly far too weak. “Insane” is nearer the mark, although it is obviously not literally right.

In 1914 William Bateson gave the presidential address to the British Association for the Advancement of Science, then meeting in Australia. His subject was heredity, and the resolution of the old “nature *versus* nurture” dispute about human beings. He recapitulated the arguments which had always, even before the discovery of genes, compelled biologists to take the “nature” side of that dispute. But now, he said, that “long-standing controversy ... is drawing to an end.”¹⁸ Thanks originally to Mendel, the actual mechanism of all inheritance is now known, a certain amount of knowledge of human genetics already exists, and this amount is certain to increase rapidly and greatly. This new knowledge, Bateson believed, must infallibly dispel that last vestige of belief in the Enlightenment delusion of equality, and in the theorems derived from it.

So it should have. But nothing of the kind has happened: in fact, quite the reverse. Equality, externalism, and educationism are the basis, now even more than ever, of all government policy in the free countries, as they have been all along, and, avowedly, in the communist ones. In the most important of our educational institutions, the Faculties of Arts, these old delusions have even assumed new forms of unprecedented absurdity and virulence. For there the feminists and the Marxists, heirs of the Enlightenment all, hold undisputed sway. There they unite to teach countless intelligent but ignorant young people that, not only ordinary differences in ability among humans, but even differences of sex, of age, of health, are all (as they like to say) “socially constituted”: nay, that death itself is only a capitalist/patriarchal “formation.” (Belief in future immortality had been a commonplace among the Enlightened in the eighteenth century: Malthus noticed it in Godwin, and remarked that immortality would not exactly lighten the pressure of population.¹⁹)

What *is* one to call such beliefs, if not “insane”? It is hard to find the right word: perhaps “cognophobe” would be best, derived from the useful recent neologism “cognophobia,” which signifies an

incurable hatred of scientific knowledge. At any rate, the late discredited Russian biologist Trofim Lysenko, who merely believed that citrus trees and wheat can be educated by changing their external circumstances, now appears, by comparison with our governments and our educators, a very paragon of rationality.

Still, it is doubtful whether this farce can be protracted much longer. For we now have, not only extensive knowledge of human genetics, but a considerable capacity to “engineer” genetic change. We also have a planet which, by the universal and heartfelt testimony of its human inhabitants, is (to say the least) populous enough already. For these reasons it is probable that contraception will soon be, for the first time, acknowledged *everywhere* as a part of Enlightenment; and that the marriage between contraception and eugenics, which took place early in our century but suffered a setback around 1940, will soon be resumed, this time with massive finality.

Notes

1. A-N. de Condorcet, *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1795), translated by June Barraclough, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1955, p. 189.
2. See Frank E. Manuel, *The Prophets of Paris*, New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965, pp. 88-89.
3. William Godwin, *An Enquiry concerning Political Justice* (1793), third edition, edited by Isaac Kramnick, Harmondsworth and Baltimore: Pelican Classics, 1976, p. 776.
4. See Thomas R. Malthus, *First Essay on Population* (1798), London: Macmillan, 1966, pp. 210-218. This is a facsimile edition, first published in 1926, of the first edition of Thomas Malthus' *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798).
5. Graham Wallas, *The Life of Francis Place* (1898), second edition, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1918, p. 169.
6. This quotation is drawn from Elie Halévy, *The Growth of Philosophic Radicalism*, translated by Mary Morris, London: Faber and Faber, 1934, p. 364.
7. This is from his *Autobiography*, but I have drawn the quotation from Halévy, *The Growth of Philosophical Radicalism*, p. 365.
8. These quotations are taken from Marie Stopes' book, *Contraception (Birth Control): Its Theory, History and Practice* (1923), second edition, London: John Bale, Sons and Danielsson Ltd, 1927, p. 314, but Stopes does not make clear whether she is here quoting from an article, a letter, or what.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 317-318.
10. This is a quotation from Besant's *Autobiographical Sketches* (1885), given in J.M. Robertson, *A History of Freethought in the Nineteenth Century* (1929), London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1969, p. 337.
11. See Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871), second edition, London: John Murray, 1874, vol. I, p. 219.
12. See Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner, *Charles Bradlaugh*, London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1894, vol. II, ch. III.

13. Margaret Sanger, *Margaret Sanger: An Autobiography*, New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1938, p. 213.
14. Ibid., pp. 374-375.
15. Marie Stopes, *Contraception*, p. 445
16. Ibid., p.7. The article by Havelock Ellis which Stopes is quoting had appeared in *Eugenics Review*, April 1917.
17. Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man* (1791), London: Watts, 1946, p. 49.
18. William Bateson, *Report of the Eighty-Fourth Meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science*, London: John Murray, 1915, p. 36.
19. See Malthus, *First Essay on Population*, ch. XII.

7

Glimpses of Pioneer Life

We are all indebted to many pioneers who, by overcoming a certain obstacle once and for all, made later generations their beneficiaries. It is always interesting, and often agreeable, to learn more about such exceptional people, especially if they have been, for some reason, almost forgotten. Two such forgotten pioneers are the subject of the following pages: an American, Margaret Sanger (1879-1966), and an Englishwoman, Marie Stopes (1880-1958).

Both were once extremely famous, but nowadays it is rare to find anyone who has so much as heard of either. Indeed, they themselves had the misfortune to outlive their own fame, by a matter of about twenty years. The reason was, that while these two brave and energetic women were still “full of fight,” the cause that they were fighting for enjoyed a sudden and complete victory, which left them, so to speak, on a deserted battlefield. Their cause, I had better state for the benefit of young readers, was contraception.

Mrs. Stopes was the driving force and leader of the contraception movement in Britain, as Mrs. Sanger was in the USA. Although the latter was a frequent visitor to England, the two women hardly ever met. In fact, after a momentary initial alliance, they became the bitterest of enemies. But it is not my intention here to write a biography of either: only to give some vignettes drawn from the life of one or the other. These vignettes will not be in chronological order, or indeed in any particular order. I have selected them simply for the light they cast on the character of these two forgotten benefactors.¹

* * *

This essay first appeared in 1990.—Ed.

Margaret Sanger married twice, but her only children were two boys and a girl, all by her first husband. The girl died at the age of four, and from that time onwards her mother devoted that day each year to private though well-publicized mourning. But neither before nor after her daughter's death was she other than a bad mother to her children. They hardly ever saw her. The boys were parked, as early and as long as possible, in residential schools and colleges: they evidently bored her. In any event, she was nearly always away, at meetings, or on lecture tours, or travelling overseas.

Once her sons became parents themselves, she sometimes found time to give grandmotherly advice to their children. Margaret was once asked by her sixteen-year-old granddaughter, how much "petting" (and the like) was permissible or desirable. She replied: "Kissing, petting, and even intercourse are alright as long as they are sincere. I have never given a kiss in my life that wasn't sincere. As for intercourse, I'd say three times a day was about right."²

In my opinion, three times a day is asking rather too much of the sincerity of even the most devoted husband, or of any one man. Apparently Margaret was of this opinion too, for she hardly ever relied on her husband alone for all the intercourse she demanded. She almost always had at least one lover, and during one of her many trips to England, she sincerely had three at the same time.

Could her advice to her granddaughter have been a joke? No: the number of jokes in Margaret Sanger was exactly the same as the number of jokes in the Bible. The same was true of Marie Stopes. And if either woman, *per impossibile*, ever had made a joke, it would not have been on the subject they both held sacred.

* * *

Margaret Sanger, then, when she wrote on contraception, at least knew something about the matter. By contrast Marie Stopes was always publishing books on subjects of which she literally had no experience. When she wrote *Married Love* in 1916, she was still a virgin, despite having been married for five years. (The marriage was finally annulled on the ground of the man's impotence.) When she published *Contraception* in 1923, she had been trying unsuccessfully for years to conceive by her second husband. In 1928 she published *Enduring Passion*, a manual which teaches married couples

how to keep the flame burning just about up to the onset of *rigor mortis*; but it was at this very time that she had terrorized her second husband into sexual incapability.

Still, did not *Doctor* Marie Stopes, as she always insisted on being called, have the second-hand experience of her patients to draw upon? Not at all: she had no patients, and was not a doctor of medicine. She merely got all the mileage she could out of the widespread belief that she was. Her doctorate was literally that: a Ph.D. in palaeobotany which she had received from Munich University early in the century.

* * *

Inevitably, the Roman Catholic Church was the most energetic enemy of our two pioneers. In the early days of the contraception movement in New York, Margaret Sanger and her followers more than once felt the heavy hand of a police force which was predominantly Irish, and which regarded the Archbishop's word as more than law.

Marie Stopes never had to contend against anything like that, but she became more and more convinced as time went on that the Catholic Church was conspiring against her everywhere. At one stage in London she owned a dangerous dog, and the municipal authorities, in response to the complaints of other ratepayers, demanded that she restrain or destroy it. She absolutely refused to do either, but hired a private detective to find out how many Catholics there were among the magistrates and aldermen who were persecuting her. Alas, they were all Protestants.

In 1923 Marie survived a particularly harrowing lawsuit, in which all the legal costs of the other side were guaranteed by the Roman Catholic hierarchy. The undergraduates of Oxford University, wild with enthusiasm for her cause, invited her to address them. Both the Town and the University refused her a platform, but the students found another location outside the jurisdiction of those authorities, and held the meeting they desired with their heroine. One fortunate undergraduate was chosen to present to her on stage a bunch of flowers: his name was Evelyn Waugh.

Marie was sustained in her struggle by a conviction that she was the chosen instrument of a divine purpose. So when the Anglican

bishops assembled for the Lambeth Conference in 1920, she sent them all a copy of *A New Gospel*. She had written this specifically for the bishops, and it begins: "My Lords, I speak to you in the name of God. You are His Priests. I am his Prophet. I speak to you of the mysteries of man and woman."³ She proceeds to explain to the bishops how vital it is that vaginal and seminal fluids should be exchanged, etc., and enjoins them to "rise to meet the new revelation." "Thee shall lead the peoples of all the world to a higher potentiality for His service than has ever been known." This use of the word "thee" must have been a particularly telling touch, because, as everyone knows, all the best Biblical characters talk like that.

She did not tell the bishops, though she jotted it down elsewhere, that "I will be canonised in 200 years."⁴ Another jotting was "Utopia could be reached in my lifetime had I the power to issue inviolable edicts."⁵

When she was forty-three Marie finally did have, by her second husband, her first and only child. It was a boy, and you can read about his upbringing, if you have a stout heart, in Hall's biography of his mother. Yet despite all the care that was lavished on him, he turned out—a twice-told tale!—badly in the end, for he insisted on marrying a woman who *sometimes wore spectacles*. This appalling crime against eugenics was more than Marie could forgive, and she cut him out of her will, for good. Still, Harry Stopes-Roe, as his name was, seems finally to have succeeded in escaping from his mother's sphere of influence: not unscathed, for no one could do that, but comparatively unscathed. This is one of the few cheerful things in Hall's book.

His father, Humphrey V. Roe, was not so fortunate. There had been a successful manufacturing business in his family, and it was redirected into aircraft manufacturing by his brother, A.V. Roe. (He was the "Avro" of those Avro-Anson aeroplanes which were a household name in Britain as late as the Second World War.) Humphrey, when he married Marie, was rich, a veteran of the Boer War, an airplane pilot himself, and indeed everything that was most eligible.

While their marriage was still intact, the couple bought, as their principal residence, a beautiful eighteenth-century house-and-forty-acres, named Norbury Park. But Roe lost nearly all his money in the Depression, and even before that, as I have said, the publication of *Enduring Passion* in 1928 had signaled the non-endurance of his

passion for Marie. So she winkled him out of their house and her life. She drafted a document, which purported to have been drafted by him, and which stated that he released her, for the future, from any interference on his part with her sexual freedom. She bullied him into signing it, and into staying away henceforth from Norbury Park. He was reduced to living alone in a single room in London, where in due course he died. This saddened Marie, who wrote a little poem about it, deploring the housing shortage.

When Marie was fifty-eight she believed, and let it be known, that she was going to live to the age of 200. When she was seventy, and puzzled as to why young men seemed blind to her physical attractions, she believed that she would live to be 120 at least. In fact, she died aged seventy-eight. It had been well said of such people as Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot, that while there's death there's hope; but perhaps the saying admits of other applications as well.

* * *

Margaret Sanger was born into a Catholic family, and received an education up to early high school. But her real education, like her real religion, only began about 1910, when she was thirty, for it was then that she was introduced by her husband, Bill Sanger, to socialist, anarchist, and bohemian circles in New York.

Here Margaret quickly learnt a great deal more than poor Bill had ever meant to teach her. Much later in life she married a millionaire, and also made a lot of money herself, as an importer of contraceptive devices. Well, it is the American Way, and Margaret became reconciled, and more than reconciled, to capitalism. But in her formative years of 1910-15, contraception was by no means the exclusive obsession which it later became with her. On the contrary, it was then only one strand in the fabric of her revolutionary socialism. At that time and place, of course, no one bothered much about calling themselves "revolutionary socialists," as distinguished from "anarchists," and it is possible that Margaret never called herself either. Still, a revolutionary socialist, tinged with anarchism, is what she certainly was.

It is nowadays often believed that such people, in those far off innocent days before the Russian Revolution, did not really know what they were doing, or were only half in earnest. This is believed

merely from ignorance. In 1912, people like Margaret Sanger and her associates knew quite as well what they were doing, and were quite as much in earnest, as revolutionary socialists in 1917, 1948, or 1989. They merely lacked the international backing, the organization, and the weapons, which their present day counterparts enjoy.

For example, one of Margaret's close associates at this formative stage of her life had served fourteen years in prison for the attempted assassination of the head of the Carnegie Steel Company. President McKinley had been fatally shot in 1901 by a man who had recently attended a lecture on assassination, given by another one of Margaret's close friends: a sequence of events of which this friend was still often heard to boast. In 1914 Margaret published (though she did not write) an article called "In Defense of Assassination," and she threatened to follow it up with one of her own in defense of arson. She defended in print some anarchists who had been accidentally killed by their own bomb, homemade in a house on Lexington Avenue. And so on, and on.

The following is a representative specimen of her political writing in 1911. The tastes of cannibals, (she wrote), are more excusable than those of capitalists, though "not so fastidious, so refined, so Christian, as those of our great American coal operators, those leering, bloody hyenas of the human race who smear themselves with the stinking money of Charity to attract the foul flies of religion who spread pollution throughout the land."⁶

As can easily be seen from this example, Margaret was no Jack London when it came to writing. Still, her general ideas were the same as his, and they had resonant echoes.

Notes

1. Competent biographies of both women exist, and most of my information has been drawn from two of these. They are *Margaret Sanger*, by Madeline Gray (New York: Richard Marek Publishers, 1979), and *Marie Stopes*, by Ruth Hall (London: Andre Deutsch, 1977). Both women found an ally and friend in "the philosopher of love," Havelock Ellis, and a good deal of information about them, but especially about Margaret Sanger, can be found in *Havelock Ellis*, by Phyllis Grosskurth (London: Allen Lane, 1980). Mrs. Sanger published two autobiographies, but both of them were "ghost written," and both are nearly unreadable. Even the second and better one, *An Autobiography* (first published in 1938 but reissued by Maxwell Reprint Company, New York, 1970), is much less valuable than it ought to have been, on account of its pervasive untruthfulness.
2. Gray, *Margaret Sanger*, pp. 227-228.

3. This quotation from *A New Gospel*, and all the others in this paragraph, are from Hall, *Marie Stopes*, pp. 160-161.
4. Ibid., in a page of quotations prefixed to the book.
5. Ibid., p. 175.
6. Gray, *Margaret Sanger*, p. 69.

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8

Altruism and Darwinism

The best-known sociobiologists do not deny the existence of altruism, or write in a cynical tone about it. On the contrary: the chapter on altruism in E.O. Wilson's *Sociobiology* is unmistakably favorable in its tone throughout, while Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene* is positively enthusiastic about altruism.¹ No doubt part of the explanation is that Dawkins and Wilson are conscious of a widespread and well-founded suspicion that they do not really believe there is such a thing as altruism at all.

All sociobiologists, in fact, lie under a strong suspicion of being, whether they admit it or not, "social Darwinists": that is, people who think that human life is a merciless competition for individual survival, and that altruism is merely a sentimental illusion. This is a view of life which was not at all uncommon around 1900, especially among American businessmen. Now however, it is almost universally execrated, with the result that few people at present willingly admit to being social Darwinists. So, just as a prudent atheist, if he lives in a society of militant theists, will not be backward in his praises of God, a prudent social Darwinist at the present time will not be backward in praising altruism.

Though nearly everyone now repudiates social Darwinism, almost all educated people still remain Darwinians. As a result, a very widespread agreement has grown up among the educated, that social Darwinism is an *illogical extension* of Darwinism. Darwinians-without-being-social-Darwinists is what most of us are, and what we think we should be. Charles Darwin himself is widely supposed to have been an example of this admirable combination.²

This essay was written in 1991.—Ed.

But he was not. It is true that Darwin did not do what Herbert Spencer did, and did with complete logical consistency: come out repeatedly and aggressively in print against taxpayers' money being spent on education, on sewage systems in the slums, on the Poor Laws, and so on. Darwin's disposition was more conciliatory than Spencer's, and his social Darwinism more prudent. But even Darwin did not shrink from saying in print that vaccination against smallpox, the Poor Laws, hospitals for imbeciles, etc., "must be highly injurious to the race of man"³ because they enable the unfit to survive and reproduce. In private, however, he often enough let his social Darwinism really rip. For example, he was strongly opposed to the practice of contraception, and said in a private letter that "overmultiplication is useful, since it causes a struggle for existence in which only the strongest and the ablest survive."⁴

Perhaps, then, it is not quite so easy after all to be a Darwinian without being a social Darwinist. This suggestion will be very much confirmed if we recall two of the most obvious features of Darwinism.

First, it is a theory about terrestrial organisms *without exception*. So far is Darwinism from making any sort of exception of *Homo sapiens*, that its proudest boast always was, and still is, that it *closes* the gap, which all previous thought had set up, between man and the rest of organic nature. Second, Darwinism says that all species of organisms are subject at all times to natural selection. Now, there is certainly no illogicality, in inferring from these two propositions combined, that *our* species is subject to natural selection *now*. Indeed it would plainly be the height of illogicality *not* to infer this.

And what is it for a species to be subject to natural selection? It is to have playing upon it two forces which can never be interrupted or even diminished. One of these forces is variation: the irrepressible tendency of organisms, even offspring of the same parents, to differ from one another in certain respects, including some respects which bestow on their possessors a better chance of surviving and reproducing than others have. The second force is the one which both Darwin and Wallace learned of from Malthus: the pressure of population, or the irrepressible tendency of the numbers of a species to increase up to the limit which is imposed by the available means of subsistence.

The joint effect of these two forces is that, in every species and at all times, a competition for life is going on among individuals which

are, by accidents of their birth, unequally equipped for that competition. The better equipped ones will naturally, on the average, thrive more and leave more descendants than their less fortunate fellows. And where their advantages are of an inheritable kind, these advantages will tend to accumulate in a "favored race" within the given species.

This is what it is, then, for a species to be subject to natural selection: it is to be subject to a selecting-out or culling of the less fit competitors in the struggle for life. This culling is entirely undesigned, of course, but if Darwinism is correct it is constant, universal and irrepressible, because variation and population pressure, which together suffice to bring it about, are themselves constant, universal and irrepressible. It is a cruel process, no doubt, or more exactly, an entirely unfeeling one. But anyway it is what Darwinism says is going on now among humans, just as it is going on among bacteria, herring-gulls, and the heartworms which parasitize dogs.

Darwin never pretended to explain everything about organisms by means of natural selection. He wrote *The Origin of Species*, not to answer every biological question, but to answer just one: how are new species brought into being? His answer was, "principally by natural selection." For natural selection will suffice to bring into being one or more favored races within a species, and once one of these races becomes so different from the ancestral stock that it can no longer breed with it, it will be a new species.

But even to this one question, I must emphasize, the Darwinian answer was only "*principally* by natural selection". Darwin himself always allowed the existence of some Lamarckian processes in evolution. Indeed, because he was always more disposed to conciliate than to contradict a critic, every edition of the *Origin*, up to and including the sixth, conceded more and more ground to Lamarckism, until the thing became a perfect scandal to the Darwinian elect. In order to prevent Darwin giving away everything distinctive of his own theory, his more doctrinaire lieutenants, such as Wallace and Huxley, had to pull him back into line, and tell him to insist more upon the *almost*-complete adequacy of natural selection to account for evolution. Which, again, he compliantly did in the seventh edition; only to start backsliding again in later editions still.

Darwin wavered, then, as to how much of the causation of evolution to attribute to natural selection. But he never wavered in the

conviction that natural selection is by far the most powerful cause determining, at each moment, which organisms and which species survive, and which do not. In a memorable image, he compared the organisms which exist at any given moment, and are subjected to population pressure and variation, to “a yielding surface [in which] ten thousand sharp wedges [are] packed close together and driven inwards by incessant blows”⁵ And we know now that he was far more nearly right than he knew. Natural selection *is* more nearly a complete explanation of evolution, and Lamarckism is a far more forlorn hope, than anyone in the nineteenth century could have known.

The reason is, of course, the confluence in the twentieth century of Darwinism with Mendelian genetics. This has enormously enlarged our knowledge of evolution and of its principal cause, natural selection. We now know an immense amount about inheritance, and a good deal about the causes of variation; whereas Darwin knew nothing whatever about either.

Still, the basic conception of natural selection has not changed. It is still that of a ceaseless and heartless culling. Of course Darwinians do not nowadays, in order to explain what natural selection is, use coarse old farmers’ words like “culling.” They talk instead of “differential rates of survival and reproduction.” Still, it comes to the same thing. If he were alive today, Adolf Hitler would be absolutely kicking himself for never having thought to use the phrase, “differential rates of survival and reproduction.”

If Darwinism is true, then, this culling is going on now among humans, exactly as it is going on among heartworms. And if Darwinism is true, then among humans now as among heartworms now, this culling, though not the only determinant, is the main determinant of which kinds of organisms survive and which do not.

In view of these facts, it is quite impossible to regard social Darwinism as an illogical inference from Darwinism. I do not say that the facts just stated make social Darwinism logically *obligatory* upon a Darwinian. But they clearly make it, at the very least, logically permissible or excusable for a Darwinian to be a social Darwinist.

It is not the social-Darwinist Darwinians who ought to be uneasy about the logicity of their position. It is, rather, the great majority of us, who are Darwinians but not social Darwinists. For the fact is that, although we subscribe in words to the proposition that all spe-

cies are always subject to natural selection, we constantly make a silent exception to this proposition, in favor of man, or at least of contemporary man. We keep our Darwinism-in-earnest strictly for non-humans, though at a pinch we will also throw in humans of the very remote past. This position may do some credit to our common sense, and I believe it does. But it does no credit to our consistency.

By general consent, the sociobiologists are the most devoted Darwinians: in fact evolution has been rightly called a religion with them.⁶ We ought therefore to expect, for the reasons I have just given, that sociobiologists will incline irresistibly towards social Darwinism. And that is what we find in fact. Of course their social Darwinism is not nowadays expressed in the old brutal language of 1900 A.D. It is much muted by a decent, or at least a prudent, regard for contemporary sensibilities. You cannot now call working-class people "*untermenschen*," for example, or call black people "inferior." Still, no one can really mistake the social Darwinism of the sociobiologists. Social Darwinism is like garlic: impossible to disguise, and even a little goes a very long way.

We, at any rate, have no need for euphemisms, and may as well ask straight out: what has Richard Dawkins or E.O. Wilson (for example), ever done to help the wretched of the earth—which now principally means, of course, to help middle-class white women in Western countries? Why, nothing. There is not even, as far as I have been able to learn, such a thing as a woman sociobiologist. Has Wilson or Dawkins ever gone in to bat for blacks, in circumstances where it might have cost them something to do so? Of course not. "When are they going to do something for the workers?" ... No, it is useless to try to defend them: the suspicions of their Marxist critics are only too well-founded. Sociobiologists, even the best of them, *are* exposed to the reproach that they are not, as Lenin and Mao were and as Pol Pot still is, flaming apostles of universal benevolence and equality.

There is also the following evidence for the social Darwinism of the best-known sociobiologists: that when other sociobiologists *do* deny the existence of altruism, or say other openly social-Darwinist things, there is never any demurrer, but sometimes overt approval, from Dawkins and Wilson. Thus for example, when M.T. Ghiselin wrote "Scratch an 'altruist' and watch a hypocrite bleed,"⁷ or when G. Hardin published an article entitled "Nice Guys Finish Last,"⁸

Wilson did not avail himself of his many opportunities to express any sort of disagreement with either author. Dawkins, for his part, praised Hardin's article,⁹ and seemed to wish he had thought of the title himself.

The two sentences just quoted will suffice to give the reader a whiff of the moral atmosphere of social Darwinism, and he will probably now feel, if he did not before, the force of my comparing social Darwinism with garlic. Ghiselin and Hardin are, of course, much less prominent sociobiologists than Dawkins or Wilson, and no doubt this fact is connected with their greater candor about altruism. Among militant theists, a *prominent* prudent atheist will be more vocal in his praise of God than an obscure prudent atheist.

* * *

Well, are the sociobiologists, or at any rate the more candid ones, right about the non-existence of altruism? That there is no altruism in heartworm life, everyone will easily agree. But is the same true of human life?

This has become a distinctly sore topic in recent decades, but altruism has always posed a theoretical problem for Darwinism. If Darwinism is true, as I have said, man must be just as subject to natural selection as is every other species. But how could altruism survive, supposing it ever occurred at all, in any species that was subject to natural selection? A human or heartworm or herring-gull that was more altruistic than its surrounding conspecifics would be apt to eat less so that others could eat more, to hang back when others pressed forward to mate and, when its conspecifics were in danger, to take upon itself the position of most danger. It is hard to think of tendencies which are more likely to result in early death, or in leaving few or no descendants who might inherit the parental altruism. In a heartless competition for individual survival, what attribute would be more likely to be quickly "selected out" than altruism?

At the same time, nothing could be more obvious than the existence of altruistic behavior among humans: that is, of people voluntarily subordinating their own well-being to that of others. Human society, from some very early stage, developed various specialized functions—the military function, the priestly function, and the medical function, for example—which, while they might bestow some

biological advantages on the individuals who discharge them, necessarily impose on those individuals certain biological penalties. The obligation on the soldier to risk wounds and death, on the priest to abstain from sexual intercourse at stated times or at all times, on the doctor not to avail himself of the opportunities for easy self-enrichment which helpless or terrified patients often afford: these are obvious examples of such penalties.

In most cases, the biological penalties attached to a specialized social function are well-known in advance to the individuals who come to discharge the function; and yet they *do* come to discharge the function, and usually without compulsion. There have been, it is true, many *hereditary* castes of soldiers, of priests, and of doctors; but the non-hereditary method of recruitment has been much more common still. And somehow all these specialized functions nearly always do find enough people, and people of the right kind, to enable the function to be discharged with some approach to effectiveness. There may be hardly a single soldier, priest, or doctor who you could truthfully say was *happy* in his or her work. And yet the work does get done, in most cases, well enough to make the society at large want to preserve these specialized functions.

But is any of this what you would expect if the members of our species are subject to natural selection and a ruthless competition for individual survival is always going on among us? Obviously not. Suppose a visitor from another solar system dropped in, and asked to be informed about the local organisms. You would tell him that humans, like heartworms and herring-gulls, are subject to natural selection. You will also have to tell him that human societies, unlike heartworm and herring-gull societies, have an army, a medical profession and a priesthood. Will not the improbability of this conjunction make you somewhat uneasy, and your visitor somewhat incredulous?

Then there is the altruism—that is, the voluntary subordination by some individuals of their own well-being to the well-being of others—which is absolutely required for successful human reproduction. As Anaximander remarked a mere 2,600 years ago, the helplessness of the young is both more prolonged and more extreme in humans than in any other animals. In the basic matter of food, not only are they helpless themselves: they cannot easily *be* helped. We adults are omnivores, but our infants are such tiresome

doctrinaires about food that there is practically no pleasing them, except with mothers' milk. Even at the milk of other mammals they are apt to look askance and die. What an absolutely gigantic bore! And what a millstone for a species to have round its neck!

Then, think of the fearful impediment—it must have often been the fatal impediment—which young children, even more than infants, present to almost every vital occupation of a primitive human society. To fighting, to fleeing, to hunting, to fishing, to concealment. Young children not only do not “pull their weight”: they are a colossal drain, and yet an utterly inescapable drain if the society is to continue, on the energy of their parents, or on that of the adults (and there must be some) who exercise parental care over them. Put yourself, again, in the position of the visitor from outer space: would parental care in *Homo sapiens* look to you like behavior designed to maximize the individual well-being of the organisms who engage in it? Obviously not. (More simply, of course, you could just ask any responsible parent.)

But if parental care is a form of altruism, and if altruism is a problem for Darwinism, then it is a problem which extends very far indeed beyond the human case. Parental care, considered as a tax on the individual well-being of adults, is a tax which *all* mammalian species have to pay more or less heavily. And even that is hardly even the beginning of the problem of altruism, because the parental-care tax falls more heavily on most birds than on almost any mammal. In fact, if organisms are supposed to behave in such a way as to maximize their individual well-being, then birds must be judged to have made absolute fools of themselves over parental care.

It is this folly of birds of course, supposing it to *be* folly, which has exposed them to the uniquely successful parasitism of the cuckoos. There is not the remotest parallel to this in mammalian life. Of course cuckoldry, in the sense of getting conspecifics to mistake your young for their own, is not at all rare in humans. But the human cuckoos, whether male or female, have never formed even the loosest of associations, let alone a world-wide, numerous, and multi-generic family. We nowadays suffer, indeed, from the parasitism of a large and successful organization which we sometimes *call* “the Family.” But one of the few consoling features about this organization is, that it is not actually a family in the sense of systematic biology; whereas the cuckoos are.

Parental care extends far beyond the birds, of course, to countless species of insects, of fish, and so on. But it is really time, and more than time, that we called a halt, and thought about what we are saying. If parental care is a form of altruism, and if altruism is a problem for Darwinism—as we have seen that it is—then it is a problem so colossal and intractable that it is simply ridiculous to keep on calling it a “problem.” We ought rather to call it, what everyone knows that it is, just a biological fact, and recognize that *it is Darwinism which is the problem*; not altruism.

The preceding sentence will strike many Darwinians, and any sociobiologists, as blasphemous; but that is just too bad. We *know* that parental care is one of the commonest things in the animal world, and we do *not* know that Darwinism, or any theory very close to it, is true. And if our attitude to Darwinism is rational rather than religious, we will not forget either of those facts.

Darwinism is not at all in the same position as a quantitative theory with predictive power, such as Newtonian mechanics-plus-gravitation. We *know* that Newtonian physics, or some theory very close to it, is true, at least for velocities much below that of light, and at least for recent centuries. Otherwise the predictions which are published in the ephemerides every year would have often been badly wrong; which they never have been. But not even Darwinism’s warmest admirers have ever dared to claim for it the power to make categorical and quantitatively precise predictions. *Explanation*, after the event, explanation of ordinary observable biological phenomena, and only qualitative or, at best, statistical explanation at that: *that* is all Darwinism was ever good for, and it still is. Darwinians will be rationally entitled to walk all over common sense when, but not before, there are evolutionary counterparts of the Nautical Almanac. And that (as the Australian vulgar say) will be the day.

But some people will try to head off the threat of parental care to Darwinism by maintaining that parental care is *not* a form of altruism: that it is, on the contrary, a form of self-love. They will say, for example, that our “children are parts of ourselves, and in loving them we but love ourselves in them.”¹⁰

Well, *of course* someone will say this! It is one of those ideas which have been around since the Greek Enlightenment of the 5th century B.C., and which, however often they are refuted, never die, because they appeal to a perennial human type: the type which in

Australia used to be called “as flash as a rat with a gold tooth.” The version of this idea which I quoted above is taken from the sixteenth-century Scottish philosopher Francis Hutcheson. He puts it, very properly, into the mouth of someone he calls a “sophist.” It will be worthwhile to continue the quotation, because Hutcheson’s criticism of this idea, though very brief, is good as far as it goes.

“*How* are [our children] parts of our selves? Not as a leg or an arm: we are not conscious of [our children’s] sensations. ‘But [the sophist replies] their bodies were formed from parts of ours.’ So is a fly, or a maggot which may breed in any discharged blood [of ours].” So, we might add, are the viruses circulating in our blood; yet an AIDS-sufferer is not *fond* of his viruses. Nor do women love their eggs, or men their sperm, more than they love their children, though eggs and sperms are all their own, while their children are only half their own.

Living things can be formed from our bodies, then, and even from our reproductive parts, without eliciting from us care or affection of any kind. But the “selfish” theory of parental care is equally refuted by many cases of the converse kind: cases in which parental care *is* elicited by living things which are *not* formed from parts of our bodies. Adopted children, for example, usually elicit little, if any, less parental solicitude than the children of our bodies. The wrong baby, brought home through a mix-up at the hospital, elicits exactly as much parental care as the right baby would have. Countless cuckolded husbands have doted on children they mistakenly believed to be their own; nor has it been found that maternal affection is significantly less in these cases. These facts are all excessively familiar, not to say homely. Yet any one of them is enough to dispose of the idea that parental care is a form of selfishness, dependent for its existence on bodily continuity.

* * *

Parental altruism is something so extremely widespread, obvious, and deeply rooted in animals that anyone who finds it puzzling, or a problem, must have in his mind some badly mistaken preconception. Parental altruism is no more a *problem* than is (say) aging in animals, or sociality, or sexual reproduction. Not that such things do not admit of scientific explanation; of course they do. But whether

or not they ever receive such explanation, they are in any case obvious biological facts. Whereas to call something a “problem” implies that it is puzzling or unlikely in the light of what we know. But it would be ridiculous to say that about parental altruism.

The same is true of the other forms of human altruism which I mentioned earlier. Soldiers who are loyal, doctors who do not rob helpless patients, and priests who are celibate are things so very common and obvious in human society that someone who finds any of them a “problem” must be in the grip of some very erroneous theory. These social phenomena too, no doubt, admit of causal explanation, just as does the biological phenomenon of parental care. But they are in any case facts of human life, both before and after they have been explained, if they ever are. And if you have a theory which makes loyal soldiers or honest doctors a “problem,” then the only real problem is your theory.

There is one and only one theory which makes a “problem” out of all forms of altruism, whether it be parental care in humans, horses, or herring-gulls, or loyal soldiers, celibate priests or honest doctors. This is the theory that all organisms are naturally or essentially or radically selfish: devoted above all to maximizing their own individual well-being. Rather than embrace this theory, and thereby create insoluble but entirely imaginary “problems,” a rational mind goes precisely the opposite way: from such obvious *facts* as parental altruism, honest doctors, and loyal soldiers, it safely concludes that the theory of universal organic selfishness is false.

It may be that no one, with the possible exception of a few sociobiologists, really believes the theory that human beings are completely and essentially selfish. All the same, most of us nowadays are easily perplexed by questions which only arise if that theory, or something very close to it, is taken for granted. Here are some examples.

“How can there still be people who can be conned into lifelong celibacy, becoming Catholic priests or nuns?” “Why don’t soldiers just run away, or refuse to fight, when it comes to the pinch?” (A few years ago, millions were enraptured with this question, in the form of the question “What if they gave a war and nobody came?”) “Bill and Sylvia have been turned into absolute slaves by that lazy son of theirs—he has now taken over most of the house, you know—why don’t they just kick him out?”

Such questions are not at all what their syntax and semantics suggests. "Why don't soldiers just run away?" *looks* like a request for a scientific explanation: a request to be told what the causes are which in fact prevent soldiers from running away. But of course it is nothing of the kind. It is an expression of surprise and indignation. And part of what it *does* mean is: "Soldiers *would* run away, if they were governed, as people usually are, by a concern for their own well-being."

All such questions are very foolish, just because they presuppose that human behavior is governed principally, or entirely, by selfishness. They are such foolish questions, in fact, that they admit of no answer, except the following. "Well, it is just the way humans are, you know. They are not maximizers of their own well-being. They *are*, on the other hand, animals which easily become devoted parents, loyal soldiers, celibate priests, or honest doctors." This answer, being the only possible one, is also perfectly adequate; but there are few educated people of the present day who will not feel it to be, as well as intolerably lame, vaguely indecent.

Yet no one would be quite so foolish as to ask, "Why don't *ant* soldiers just run away?" Or at least this question, if it ever *were* asked, really would be what its surface-grammar suggests: a request for information as to what it is that prevents ant soldiers from running away. It would *not* be an expression of surprise and indignation at the shocking indifference which ant soldiers display towards the highest of all priorities: saving one's own skin. Even sociobiologists do not expect an American ant soldier to flee to Canada to escape fighting, any more than they expect him to study the stock exchange reports in the morning paper, or to wonder whether he can afford a dirty weekend in the Bahamas.

They just about *should*, though. Because sociobiologists assume, as a matter of course, that animal behavior is almost entirely designed to maximize the well-being of the agent. As a result of this, sociobiological writings are full of questions which are foolish in just the same way as the questions I mentioned a moment ago about celibates, soldiers, and parents. Two examples follow.

In many species of animals, including man, there are surrender signals which, once received, make it difficult or impossible for fighting to continue. E.O. Wilson writes that this fact poses "a considerable theoretical difficulty: Why not always try to kill or maim the

enemy outright?"¹¹ Why not, indeed, if conspecifics are always engaged in a merciless struggle for survival? But if surrender signals pose a considerable theoretical difficulty in general, then they do so in man too, and in every particular case. It is therefore a considerable theoretical difficulty, why *Professor Wilson does not always try to kill or maim his enemies*? Yet this question is obviously not a considerable theoretical difficulty. It is just an unusually stupid joke, which would be recognized as such even at Harvard.

It sometimes happens among monkeys, as it does among humans, that a bereaved mother will steal another mother's baby, "adopt" it and care for it. Richard Dawkins finds this behavior profoundly puzzling, as indeed from his point of view it is. For as he says, "the adopter not only wastes her own time; she also releases a rival female from the burden of child-rearing, and frees her to have another child more quickly. It seems to me a critical example which deserves some thorough research. We need to know how often it happens; what the average relatedness between adopter and child is; and what the attitude of the real mother is—it is, after all, to her advantage that her child *should* be adopted; do mothers deliberately try to deceive naïve young females into adopting their children?"¹²

The obvious way for Dr. Dawkins to begin the needed research would be by asking his mother (if she is alive), and his wife (if she has children), whether women *do* try to deceive other women in this way. If the answer is "yes," he might even learn (as the lawyers used to say) "something to his advantage"; though admittedly there are other and less pleasing possibilities as well. If the answer is "no," Dr. Dawkins, as a devout Darwinian, will then have to ask them *why* women do not pursue their own advantage in this very obvious way? But his mother or wife (unless they too have been unhinged by sociobiology) will tell him what is true: that his question could only arise out of a bizarre misconception of what human mothers are like. They might even add, "It would be just as sensible for a career woman to ask a termite queen, why she does not do something about her awful figure, regain her youthful mobility, get out of the house, and improve her mind by reading the most emancipated female authors?"

The two quotations given a moment ago are simply late-twentieth-century samples drawn from a stream which has been flowing strongly for the last hundred years: the stream of absurdities generated by the Darwinian belief that the members of each species are engaged in a ceaseless competition for individual well-being. It will be instructive to give some late-nineteenth-century samples.

The split between social Darwinists and other Darwinians only began around 1890. Until then the Darwinians had been a united and optimistic band, exhilarated by the vision of eternal organic improvement, and united by the need to defend their new science against Christian obscurantists. It never occurred to them to exempt man from the cosmic process of evolution, or to doubt that the result of natural selection is improvement overall, however painful for some individuals might be the competition on which natural selection depends. Darwin had drawn a vital clue from Malthus, and what was Darwinism, after all, but the extension to the whole organic world of the best economic science: the science of Malthus and Ricardo? Of course there were in 1890 still some economic troglodytes who defended paternalistic care of the poor, and protectionist measures such as the Corn Laws: but what of them? After all, there were also still ignorant Evangelicals, who defended the Biblical account of Creation, and beastly bishops who defended the doctrine of eternal torments. All these people condemned what had begun to be called "evolutionary ethics": they said it really meant that might is right. But no Enlightened person, and *a fortiori* no Darwinian, cared tuppence for the condemnation of any of those living fossils.

But within ten years of Darwin's death in 1882, the unity and the optimism of the Darwinian movement were rudely shattered. They were shattered by the very man who had succeeded to the leadership of the movement, by "Darwin's bulldog" as he was called, in recognition of his thirty years of loyal and energetic service: T.H. Huxley, of all people.

Beginning with his 1885 essay, "The Struggle for Existence in Human Society," but principally in his Romanes lecture of 1893, "Evolution and Ethics," Huxley threw down the gauntlet with all possible scorn, contempt, and indignation, against so-called evolutionary ethics, or against what later came to be called "social Darwinism." The survival of the fittest is indeed the uniform outcome of the cosmic process of evolution, he says; but the survival

of the fittest is merely the survival of the strongest and the most selfish. *Ethical* progress, by contrast, consists and must consist in resisting and limiting, as far as can be, the reign of force and selfishness.

"Evolution and Ethics" made an enormous sensation. Huxley had long been a hero of science, but in 1893, by emerging as a hero of morality as well, he became the complete Victorian hero, and the most popular man in Britain. The Christians of every kind, groggy from thirty years of intellectual battering, could hardly believe their good fortune in having Huxley defect to their side as a champion of morality. It was as though the Pope had been converted to Lutheranism at some point in the sixteenth century when Lutheran fortunes were at an especially low ebb. The biologist St. George Mivart, who had been converted first to Darwinism and then to Catholicism, considered that the way was now open for Huxley, too, to be received into the Church.¹³

But the secularists were equally delighted by Huxley's 1893 essay. What Friend of Humanity could fail to be delighted, when Darwinian science took on a less heartless aspect than it had always worn before? The secularists were, of course, socialists almost to a man and a woman; and socialists of every shade, from hand-wringers to bomb-throwers, loved "Evolution and Ethics." They considered it the most terrific rebuke which capitalist ethics had received since *Das Kapital*, twenty-five years before. And while Marx's claim to scientific authority could easily be questioned (easily indeed), no one could question Huxley's claim.

In fact there were only two small groups of people who thought badly of "Evolution and Ethics." One group consisted of the industrialists and businessmen who believed until then that they had a moral license from Darwinism to treat their rivals and employees with maximum ruthlessness. The other group consisted of those Darwinians who considered that Huxley had simply contradicted Darwinism. Leslie Stephen was one of these. He sourly remarked that if organic evolution really is universal and irresistible, as Darwinism says it is, then it is illogical, as well as sentimental, to exhort members of a certain species to resist it.¹⁴

A good point, too. But then, it is rather easy to make good points against these so-much-admired essays. Or rather, to tell the truth, these essays contain remarkably little except logical, or biological, or historical absurdities.

The most glaring of the biological absurdities concerns early man. Huxley knew perfectly well, of course, that in Britain in his own time, human life bore not the least resemblance to a universal fight for individual survival. Why, life did not resemble *that* even in New Guinea, nay, even in Sydney, as he found when he was out here in the late 1840s as a surgeon on H.M.S *Rattlesnake*.¹⁵ Still, Darwinism says that in every species a pitiless competition to survive is always going on. All right: there must at least have *been* such competition among humans, in the remote past.

So Huxley tells us that in “nature,” or in “the state of nature,” or in “the savage state,” each man “appropriated whatever took his fancy and killed whomsoever opposed him, if he could.”¹⁶ How *very* unlike our Professor Wilson! But then, in those days, “Life was a continual free fight, and beyond the limited and temporary relations of the family, the Hobbesian war of each against all was the normal state of existence.”¹⁷

One can hardly believe one’s eyes in reading these words. Thomas Hobbes, two hundred years earlier, had published some sufficiently ridiculous *a priori* anthropology. But Huxley is a great Darwinian scientist writing around 1890, and yet his stuff is even sillier than Hobbes’. What, for example, is a Hobbesian savage, presumably an adult male, doing with a family at all, however “limited and temporary”? In “a continual free fight,” a man encumbered by a woman and children would be hopelessly disadvantaged against a man who was not so encumbered. To maximize his own well-being, the man should simply eat his children and wife before someone else does. They are first-class protein, after all, and easy meat too, compared with most of the protein that is going around. It is the reign of unbridled force and selfishness that we are talking about, not some unpleasantness between two families in a suburban street.

An intelligent child of nine could have told Huxley that in a continual free fight of all against all, there would soon have been no children and no women, and hence no men. In other words, the human race would not exist now, unless there had always been some care of children by women, and some protection of and provision for women by men. What, then, can have prevailed on a great biologist in 1893 to postulate a biologically impossible “state of nature” for our species? Well, of course, it was simply that Darwinism requires a struggle for survival to be going on always and everywhere,

and that Huxley had to try and find *some* examples of this struggle among humans.

The imaginary remote past is Huxley's most promising example of Darwinian competition in human life. But he does the best he can to find other examples. Thus, he says, look at the present cut-throat competition among western European *nations*, for colonies and markets; that's pretty Darwinian, isn't it?¹⁸ The reader, for his part, hardly knows where to look. Then Huxley decides that there is, after all, still *some* Darwinian individual competition in the Britain of his own time: namely, among the poorest five per cent of the nation where, he says, the pressure of population is still maximal.¹⁹

This is a pitifully meager harvest of examples of a process which, according to Darwinism, is universal and constant in human life. But Huxley excels himself by discovering that there had been in England, not so long before, a resumption of "the struggle for existence between man and man": namely, the civil war in the seventeenth century.²⁰ Who can possibly read this without stupefaction? Cromwell, after he had had King Charles killed, no doubt ate him; uncooked too, I shouldn't wonder, and selfishly refused to give John Milton and General Ireton a single bite. Or was cannibalism confined to the cavalier side of the question?

But the over-arching absurdity of these essays is a certain logical inconsistency which Huxley himself repeatedly acknowledges,²¹ yet clings to each side of like a limpet. On the one hand, he constantly implies that "the ethical process" (as he calls it) can and does resist and limit "the cosmic process" of evolution. (We build hospitals and train doctors in medicine and ethics, for example.) But on the other hand, he acknowledges that the ethical process is itself part of the cosmic process. In particular, parental care in humans, and therefore the subordination of competition to cooperation, at least between generations and between sexes, *must* be as natural and aboriginal as anything in human life.

Yet once this fact is acknowledged, of course, there simply *is* no David and Goliath contest between little ethics-and-altruism in the one corner and giant evolution-and-selfishness in the other. There is therefore nothing for Huxley, or for anyone else, to strike heroic attitudes about. We simply would not be here unless altruism had long ago shown itself able to keep selfishness within bounds. Not, once again, that the case depends exclusively on man; it does not.

Huxley should have given us a description of what the “state of nature” had been like among birds, for example. What was kook-aburra life like, I wonder, before they too settled down to a life-style in which fighting is virtually unknown, and in which domestic cares bulk large?

Huxley was led to swallow this ocean of absurdities by the need to find or manufacture examples in human life of the Darwinian struggle for survival. It is therefore interesting to observe that, in Darwin’s own writings, there is not a single one of the absurdities with which Huxley’s late essays abound. Yet Darwin would have had quite as much intellectual motive as Huxley had to postulate, for example, a hyper-Hobbesian “state of nature” in the past. This difference, I can only suppose, was due to the abundant caution and prudence with which Darwin was endowed.

Although these late essays of Huxley were discreditable, in fact disgraceful, to his head, they were creditable to his heart. He got himself into the ludicrous position he did because his nostrils had rightly detected the power-worship latent in Darwinism, whereas what *he* wanted was Darwinism-with-decency; Darwinism without social Darwinism, Darwinism which does not promise success and give honorific titles to people distinguished mainly by their talent for trampling other people down. This is also what nearly every educated person nowadays wants, as I said near the start of this essay. Huxley was simply the first of us.

It is another question, of course, whether it is logically possible for us to *have* what we want. I have indicated earlier that I believe it is not. Darwinism is false if man is now exempt from natural selection. It is false again, if natural selection is not everywhere dependent upon ruthless competition for survival. The social Darwinist concludes, with consistency on his side, that human altruism is a delusion. But a rational person will conclude, with equal consistency and far more credibility, from the obvious fact of human altruism, that Darwinism is a delusion. If you are determined to have Darwinism *and* decency, then your position will be essentially that of Huxley in 1893: evolution-and-selfishness for the brute creation, and ethics-and-altruism for us. But then you have exempted man from natural selection, and thereby abandoned Darwinism.

I think it will be advisable for me to give an actual present-day example of Darwinism-*without*-decency; or at least of its distinctive moral atmosphere. Don't worry: I am not going to relate some scandal about a living social Darwinist, whether he be of the overt or the covert sort. Even if it were allowable for me to do so, I have no information of the kind that would be required. I know nothing about Wilson or Dawkins or Ghiselin or Hardin, or any other sociobiologist, except things which can be learnt from their publications. My example is just a small literary one: a significant choice of words by one of these writers. But it will be enough to give you a sudden strong whiff of the moral atmosphere of sociobiology, and hence of current social Darwinism.

One thing which can easily be learnt from the writings of E.O. Wilson is that he is not a good writer, or a bad one either. He is just average-professorial, and his writing, as distinct from its content, can never have given either much pleasure or much pain to any reader. From Richard Dawkins' writings, by contrast, one easily learns that he is quite a good writer, lively, and careful in his choice of words. No doubt this is part of the reason why he has written two bestsellers and Wilson has written none.

Well, at one point Wilson describes certain species of ants which, having no worker-caste of their own, hi-jack the worker-ants of another species, and put them to work looking after their young. To detach the workers from their former allegiance, the parasite queen infiltrates the other species' nest and kills the host queen. In some species the method adopted is as follows. "The parasite queen rides about on the back of the host queen and then, in Wilson's (1971) delightful description, 'begins the one act for which she is uniquely specialized: slowly cutting off the head of her victim.'"²²

This passage is from Dawkins' *The Extended Phenotype*, and the passage which is quoted inside it is from Wilson's *The Insect Societies*. Now what is there, about Wilson's description of how the parasite queen kills the host queen that is delightful? It is no more distinguished, from an aesthetic or literary point of view, than the rest of the book in which it occurs. Though the vanity of authors knows no bounds, I do not believe for a moment that even Wilson himself would claim any particular merit for this description. Yet Dawkins finds it *delightful*. What *can* we think, except that it is not really the description, but what is described, which he finds delightful?

This will be agreed, I believe, to give a sufficiently pungent whiff of the moral atmosphere of social Darwinism; though no doubt my earlier comparison of social Darwinism with garlic was too favorable. It must also be realized that Dawkins gave us this whiff *deliberately*: he is much too conscious a writer not to have chosen the word “delightful” with care. This deliberateness just adds to the pungency.

Notes

1. See E.O Wilson, *Sociobiology, the New Synthesis*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975, ch. 5; and Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, London: Paladin Books, 1978, esp. p. 215.
2. See, for example, Mary Midgley, *Evolution as a Religion*, London and New York: Methuen, 1985. This splendid book is an attack on social Darwinism in general, and sociobiology in particular; but it is dedicated “To the memory of Charles Darwin, Who Did Not Say These Things.”
3. Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, second edition, London: John Murray, 1874, vol. I, p. 206.
4. See J.M. Robertson, *A History of Freethought in the Nineteenth Century* (1929), London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1969, p. 337.
5. Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (1859), edited by Ernst Mayr, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966 (facsimile reprint of the first edition), p. 67.
6. Midgley, *Evolution as Religion*.
7. M.T. Ghiselin, *The Economy of Nature and the Evolution of Sex*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974, p. 247.
8. In Michael S. Gregory, Anita Silvers, and Diane Sutch, *Sociobiology and Human Nature*, San Francisco, Washington, and London: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1978, pp. 183-194.
9. Richard Dawkins, *The Extended Phenotype*, Oxford and San Francisco: W.H. Freeman and Co., 1982, p. 237. Cf. pp. 55-56 of the same book.
10. Francis Hutcheson, *An Enquiry concerning the Origin of Our Ideas of Virtue or Moral Good* (1725), partly reprinted in Lewis Amherst Selby-Bigge, *British Moralists*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1897, vol. I, p. 95. The quotation is continued in my second next paragraph. (I am grateful to my old friend Dr. Eric Dowling for drawing my attention to this passage.)
11. Wilson, *Sociobiology*, p. 129.
12. Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, p. 110.
13. See Edward Clodd, *Thomas Henry Huxley*, Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1902, p. 209.
14. See Noel Annan, *Leslie Stephen*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1984, pp. 284-286.
15. Cf. *T.H. Huxley's Diary of the Voyage of H.M.S. Rattlesnake*, edited from the unpublished ms. by Julian Huxley, London: Chatto and Windus, 1935.
16. T.H. Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics, and other Essays*, London: MacMillan and Co., 1894, p. 205.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 204.
18. *Ibid.*, e.g. p. 40, pp. 210-212.

19. Ibid., pp. 40-41.
20. Ibid., p. 38.
21. Ibid., note 20, pp. 114-5; also pp. 11-12.
22. Dawkins, *The Extended Phenotype*, p. 70.

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9

Paralytic Epistemology, or the Soundless Scream

Wasps never live to see their offspring, but this has not prevented some of them from hitting on an ingenious way of providing for the future welfare of their young. They build clay cells, deposit their eggs in them, stock the cells with spiders, and seal them up. The spiders have been paralyzed by the parent wasp, by chemical means. This chemical not only does not kill the spider, but leaves him quite unharmed; it just immobilized him. So the baby wasp, when he emerges from the egg, finds himself surrounded by food: first-class protein at that, and fresh as a daisy.

For the spiders, if they are conscious of being paralyzed, the thing must be horrible almost beyond our ability to imagine. Not quite beyond it, however; because we have all known something like this paralysis in our dreams. We dream that we are in some fearful danger, and we try to flee or fight; but our limbs respond only faintly, or not at all, to our will. We try to call for help, or we simply scream; but, most horribly, no sound comes out of our mouths. Our mental energies are all intact, but our physical energies have somehow vanished. This paralysis, all will agree, is the crowning horror of a nightmare.

But nightmares are not the only parallel which our experience furnishes to the spiders' plight. Citizens of the open societies of the West have experienced, during the last forty years, a waking parallel to it: a political one. In these societies, the Communist power comes steadily on, not only without the citizens wishing it, but in direct

opposition to their wills. Hardly one in a hundred of them does not regard Communism with fear and loathing, and they try to give effect to these mental energies. They write, or talk, or at least vote, against the Communists: yet it is all as though they did not. Somehow, no one can tell how, their resistance is paralyzed, just as in a nightmare.

No one will suppose that the causes of this political paralysis are *purely* intellectual. But to an important extent its cause is intellectual, and even (odd as this may sound) purely logical. The fact is, we painted ourselves into a logical corner. We set ourselves to achieve a society which would be maximally tolerant. But that resolve not only gives maximum scope to the activities of those who have set themselves to achieve the maximally intolerant society. It also, and more importantly, paralyzes our powers of resistance to them, and evidently must do so. It is this logical problem, as much as anything, which has nullified internal resistance in the West to Communist power.

This is obvious enough, of course, or rather, it is a commonplace of liberal political theory. This problem for liberalism is so far from being new, in fact, that a more special version of it plagued liberals like Locke in the seventeenth century: the problem of extending religious toleration to intolerant religions, such as Roman Catholicism. But there are also versions of the same logical problem which are more general than the political version; and some of these are even general enough to be of philosophical interest.

The political problem just referred to arises from the paralyzing nature of liberalism, or of what might be called "the universal permission" in politics:

(1) Politically, everything is permissible.

A similar proposition, but of intermediate generality, somewhere between politics and philosophy, is the universal permission in the field of morals:

(2) Morally, everything is permissible.

There are some questions about (2) which we can properly discuss. (For example, whether it is a logical consequence, as many

have thought, of atheism.) But the question whether (2) is true is not among these questions. On the contrary, if you so much as hear others discussing whether (2) is true—and they are not just “doing philosophy,” but are in earnest—then if you are intelligent, prudent, and not yourself a danger to the public, you will simply contact the police.

Accordingly, I do not intend to discuss, here or anywhere else, whether (2) is true. I only wish to point out that, just as (1) is a principle paralytic of all political energy, so (2) is a principle paralytic of all moral energy. Once adopt (2), and you cannot thereafter consistently express moral opposition to anything whatever; and still less can you consistently put such opposition into practice. The wasp has given you the treatment. You can try to put forth moral energy; but just like the dreamer’s physical energy in a nightmare, it has gone.

This paralytic character of (2) is obvious enough. No doubt this is because (2) comprehends (1) as a special case while the paralytic character of (1) is familiar to us, not only from theory but, even more, from experience. It does not take a philosopher to work out that if (2) is true, then denial of (2) is morally permissible too; so is any practical implementation of such a denial; and so on. In fact many people, without being philosophers, but just by being permissive parents, have had expensive practical experience of the paralytic character of (2).

But (2) is not all that big a generalization of (1), and not big enough to be of much philosophical interest. A universal permission which is, by contrast with (2) and (1), genuinely big and philosophical, as well as comparatively unfamiliar, is Professor Feyerabend’s “Anything goes.” For it is clear from his present article,* as well as from his voluminous other writings, that he means by this not only, what might have satisfied a less hardy skeptic, that

(3) Scientifically, everything is permissible.

He means also that

(4) Methodologically, everything is permissible.

That is, denial is permissible not only of the conclusions of science which might be current at any given time; denial is also permissible of the principles of logic or rational inference, deductive or

* See Paul K. Feyerabend, “On the Limits of Research,” *New Ideas in Psychology*, 2 (1984), pp. 3-7. It is for this article that the current essay was originally written as a commentary.—Ed.

non-deductive, which might be current at any time, or at all times, and which are employed to reach those conclusions from given evidence. What he means would, perhaps, be best summed up by saying

(5) Cognitively, everything is permissible.

This thesis, though comparatively unfamiliar, is of course far from being new. We had the same thing from Pyrrho over two thousand years ago. That nothing is known; that no proposition is even more probable than any other; that “not one, any more than the other,” as that silly old bore Sextus Empiricus says over and over again.¹ And if (5) was silly, old, and boring around A.D. 200, what is it now?

No one will enter into discussion of (2), I said, if he is intelligent, prudent, not a public danger, and believes the other parties to the discussion to be in earnest. Likewise, no one not mentally disordered will enter into a discussion of (5) if he believes the other parties to be in earnest; while if he believes them not to be so, again he will not enter into discussion of (5). Accordingly I have no intention of discussion, here or anywhere else, whether (5) is true. Discussion of Feyerabend’s philosophy of science is unprofitable in practice in any case, as many philosophers have learnt by *expériences nombreuses et funestes*. But it is also, for reasons I have given elsewhere,² futile even in principle. All I wish to do here is to point out that, just as (1) is a paralytic principle in politics, and (2) is in morals, so (5) is a paralytic principle in epistemology. Once you adopt it, there is nothing whatever in science, in logic, or in any cognitive field, to which you can consistently object. The wasp has got you.

Of course you can object to things inconsistently; and this is a possibility of which Feyerabend freely avails himself. He tells us that anything goes, yet his critics soon find to their cost that misrepresentation of his views does not go, that illogical inference from his views does not go, and so on. Some of these critics wonder at the ineffectiveness of their criticisms, and chide Feyerabend for his inconsistencies. Still, they should have known in the first place that if anything goes, inconsistency certainly goes too.

But if his critics are puzzled by the ineffectiveness of their blows, that is nothing to the bewilderment which Feyerabend evidently feels at the nightmare-like ineffectuality of his own. He is so baffled, indeed, that all he can do is call for the dismissal of his critics from their jobs.³ Yet there is really nothing baffling in the matter. "Anything goes," or (5), is a paralytic principle; and just as the dreamer finds all his physical energy gone in nightmares, so Feyerabend should not be surprised if, having adopted (5), he finds in epistemology that all his screams are soundless.

How, indeed, could one rationally respond to someone who said (5) and meant it? To some one, that is, who really believed that no principle even of logic or rational inference is rationally preferable to its denial. To someone, for example, who really thought it permissible to hold that "Socrates is not mortal," is inconsistent with "The sun rises in the east," or consistent with "Socrates is a man and all men are mortal." Of course I do not know the answer to this question: no one does.

It is fortunate, therefore, that this question does not arise in practice. At least, it does not arise in Feyerabend's case. For he is certainly not in earnest. This fact is obvious, and anyway he tells us so himself. It is true, he is a sort of wild man in philosophy, calls himself an anarchist and all that, but at the same time he is nervous lest he make us nervous, and therefore feels a need to assure us that he "would not hurt a fly."⁴ More reassuring still, he enjoins the reader of *Against Method*, indeed he pleads with him, not to take what is written in that book too seriously.⁵ This was undeniably handsome, in fact irresistible, and for my part I willingly closed with the offer, at once and for good. All other readers of Feyerabend should do the same. (A fly, though, might still be well advised to give him a wide berth: who does not know what bloodthirsty passions often lurk under pacifistic interiors?)

Feyerabend took his slogan "Anything goes" from one popular entertainer, Cole Porter, and his philosophy with trifling amendments, from another: Sir Karl Popper. Another Cole Porter song title, "What is this thing called Love?," slightly amended, furnished another neo-Popperian philosopher with a title for his book.⁶ And these conjunctures are (as the Marxists say) no accident: here, as always, deep calls to deep. For Popper (as I have pointed out elsewhere⁷) is nothing less, though he is also nothing more, than the inaugurator of the

Jazz Age in the philosophy of science. If things had been a little different, this glorious place in the history of philosophy might have been filled by Feyerabend instead. Yet such speculations are hardly profitable. For as Bertie Wooster once said, "If things had been different ... but then, they never are."

Notes

1. Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, translated by R.G. Bury, Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1967.
2. David Stove, *Popper and After*, Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1982, chaps I and II, pp. 28, 86. [*Popper and After* has recently been reissued as *Anything Goes: Origins of the Cult of Scientific Irrationalism*, Sydney: Macleay Press, 1998, and as *Scientific Irrationalism*, New Brunswick, USA, and London, UK: Transaction, 2001.—Ed.]
3. Paul K. Feyerabend, "In Defense of Aristotle," in Gerard Radnitzky and Gunnar Andersson, *Progress and Rationality in Science*, Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science, vol. 68, Dordrecht and Boston: D. Reidel, 1978, p. 144.
4. Paul K. Feyrabend, *Against Method*, London: New Left Books, 1975, p. 21, note 12. [This note does not appear in the later editions of *Against Method*.—Ed.]
5. Ibid.
6. Alan F. Chalmers, *What is This Thing Called Science?*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1976.
7. David Stove, "How Popper's Philosophy Began," *Philosophy* 57, 1982, pp. 381-387.

Part III

Reclaiming the Jungle

"I cannot help feeling that rational thought, 'the calm sunshine of the mind,' has a right to exist, as well as madness; and even that it has some right to be heard (though I admit that that is more debatable). It is, in any case, a necessity of life for some people.

"... [But] given a large aggregation of human beings, and a long time, you cannot reasonably expect rational thought to win. You could as reasonably expect a thousand unbiased dice, all tossed at once, all to come down 'five,' say. There are simply far too many ways, and easy ways, in which human thought can go wrong. Or, put it the other way round: anthropocentrism cannot lose. The jungle will reclaim the clearing ..."

—David Stove, "What is Wrong with Our Thoughts?" (1991)

10

The Columbus Argument

There might be good arguments for being anti-conservative in particular circumstances. But are there any good arguments for being anti-conservative in *all* circumstances? If there are, they would clearly have to be very general arguments: general enough to be philosophical, or at least to be of interest to philosophers.

There has only ever been one very general argument for anti-conservatism, as far as I know, and it is not a good one. But it is one which has been so widely *thought* good that hardly anyone in the last 150 years, touched at all by education, can have entirely escaped its influence. I call it the “‘They All laughed at Christopher Columbus’ Argument,” and for short “the Columbus argument.” It goes as follows: “Throughout almost all of human history, people who have opposed innovations, whether in belief or in behavior, have met with hostility. Death, or persecution, or prison, or at best neglect, has been the regular reward for their efforts. Yet whatever improvements have actually been made in human life, either in our opinions or in our practice, have depended, and must always depend, on some innovator in the first place. We ought, therefore, not merely to tolerate, but to welcome, innovators.”

The germ of the argument goes back to Socrates’ suggestion, when on trial for his life, that he actually deserved, not death, but a life pension from the state for the moral and intellectual stimulation he had given it. But the modern *locus classicus* is, of course, John Stuart Mill’s essay *On Liberty* (1859). And the argument in the form which Mill gave it (which is essentially as I have given it above) has swept the world. With every day that has passed since Mill published it, it

This essay first appeared in 1987.—Ed.

has been more influential than it was the day before. In the intellectual and moral dissolution of the West in the twentieth century, every step has depended on conservatives being disarmed, at some critical point, by the Columbus argument: by revolutionaries claiming that any resistance made to them is only another instance of that undeserved hostility which beneficial innovators have so regularly met with in the past.

Mill's essay did not go unanswered in its own time. Some conservatives saw clearly enough both the dangerousness, and the weakness, of the Columbus argument. The best reply to *On Liberty* was *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity* (1878), a book by J.F. Stephen (Leslie Stephen's brother and hence Virginia Woolf's uncle). The contest was very unequal intellectually: Stephen made mincemeat of Mill. But, historically, his book soon vanished without a trace, while Mill's essay continued its all-conquering career.

We need no books to teach us now how dangerous the Columbus argument is: we have as our teacher instead the far greater authority of experience—*expériences nombreuses et funestes* (as Laplace said in another connection). For "They all laughed at Christopher Columbus" led, by a transition both natural and reasonable, to "It's an outrageous proposal, but we'll certainly consider it." That in turn led, naturally enough to "We *must* consider it *because* it's an outrageous proposal." And this in turn has brought us to the uncontrollable violence and irrationality of life in the free countries in 1987. People who have surrendered, in their own minds, the right to deride ideas however absurd, or to repress conduct however vicious, are (as the vulgar in Australia say) history.

As to the weakness of the Columbus argument, it is perfectly glaring. No doubt it is true that, for any change for the better to have taken place, either in thought or in practice, someone first had to make a new departure. But it is equally true that someone first had to make a new departure in order for any change for the *worse* ever to have taken place. And there must have been at least as many proposed innovations which were, or would have been, for the worse as ones which were, or would have been, for the better. But if in the past bad innovations have been at least as common as good ones, then we have at least as much reason to conclude that we ought to *discourage* innovators in the future as to conclude that we ought to encourage them.

How did an argument so easily answered ever impose upon intelligent people? Easily. It was simply a matter of ensuring what Ludwig Wittgenstein (in another connection) called *a one-sided diet of examples*. Mention no past innovators except those who were innovators-for-the-better. Harp away endlessly on the examples of Columbus and Copernicus, Galileo and Bruno, Socrates and (if you think the traffic will bear it) Jesus. Conceal the fact that there must have been at least one innovator-for-the-worse for everyone of these (very overworked) good guys. Never mention Lenin or Pol Pot, Marx or Hegel, Robespierre or the Marquis de Sade, or those forgotten innovators of genius to whom humanity has been indebted for any of the countless insane theories which have ever acquired a following in astronomy, geology, or biology. There is no weakness in the Columbus argument which cannot be more than made up for by a sufficiently tendentious choice of examples.

In fact, of course, innovators-for-the-worse have always been far *more* numerous than innovators-for-the-better: they always *must* be so. Consider the practical side first. Do you understand television sets well enough to be able to repair a non-functioning one or to improve a malfunctioning one? Probably not: very few do. And if you, being one of the great majority, nevertheless do set out to repair or improve a TV set, it is a million to one, because of the complexity of the thing, that you will make it worse if you change it at all. Now human societies, at least ones as large and rich as ours, are incomparably more complex than TV sets, and in fact no one understands them well enough to repair or improve them. Whatever some people may claim, there are no society repairmen, as there are TV repairmen. So if anyone gets to try out in practice his new idea for repairing or improving our society, it is something like billions to one that he will actually make things worse if he changes them at all. Of course it is possible that he will make things better, but that is trivially true: it is possible, after all, that a furious kick will repair your ailing TV set.

The same holds for innovations in belief, at any rate in sciences like physics and chemistry; for those are intellectual structures of a size and richness comparable with our social structures. Even there, of course, it is always possible that a heretic or an amateur is right and the scientific establishment wrong. But then, possibility is cheap, as I have just pointed out: the thing is extremely improbable, that's

all, and you would be extremely irrational to believe it in any given case. Physicists and chemists rightly try, therefore, to maintain a professional organization and a screen designed to exclude the teeming would-be Columbuses whose letters begin, "I do not have a science degree, but"

In less advanced sciences, of course, the situation is proportionately different. And by the time you come to the festering slums, such as sociology and anthropology have now become, the situation is quite reversed. There, almost any innovation *would* be for the better, and the rankest amateur, if he could get his foot in the door, would be sure to raise the tone of the place out of sight, morally of course but even intellectually.

* * *

Mill pleaded in *On Liberty* for the widest variety of what he chose to call "experiments in living." The phrase was a sickeningly dishonest attempt to capture some of the deserved prestige of science for things which had not the remotest connection with science; principally—need I say?—certain sexual and domestic arrangements of a then novel kind. Certain respectable people had dropped him, because of his irregular association with Mrs. Harriet Taylor, and Mill thought that this showed clearly the need for a whole new, and more open-minded, philosophy of life. Not much more than that: he would probably have been horrified even by something like the Oneida Community.

Yet only sixty-odd years before Mill wrote *On Liberty*, certain more momentous "experiments in living" had been performed on France, by the Babeufs and the Robespierres. And even while he wrote, the Marxes, Bakunins, etc., were filling Europe with their announcements of the far more drastic "experiments in living" which they were preparing. It is idle to say that Mill could not have foreseen what these things portended: other people could and did foresee what they portended, and no one in England knew what was happening in Europe better than Mill did. The longer he lived, the more his writings worked to the advantage of the socialist "experiments," even when (as in the case of *On Liberty*) they were not intended to do so.

Here, then, is a sufficiently curious sequence of events. A philosopher publishes an argument in favor of welcoming innovations. This argument is so bad that, on its own, it could hardly have deceived a child of ten. Supplemented, however, by a tendentious selection of examples, this argument sweeps the world, and does more than anything else to bring about the present internal dissolution, and external irresolution, of free countries.

Yet some people think that philosophers, and cheap tricks of argument, do not matter.

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11

Bombs Away

Mr. Anthony Kenny is an English philosopher who is also Master of Balliol College, Oxford. Kenny believes that Britain should unilaterally renounce her nuclear arms. But he is neither a pacifist nor an apostle of Communism. In fact, he wants Britain to strengthen her conventional forces.

This is scarcely a practicable policy. It is hardly in human nature to settle for inferior weapons and throw away your most formidable ones when your enemy does nothing of the kind. To destroy your rifles while the enemy keeps his, and to stockpile spears instead—what sort of mental state would you have to be in to do *that*? It is one so unusual, at any rate, that it can be safely left out of political calculations. No, the only time that people will unilaterally give up their most formidable weapons is when they are bent on giving up *all* their weapons. In other words, Kenny's policy amounts in practice to pacifism, whatever he may intend.

But if his policy were to be adopted, it is easy to see what the consequences would be. Britain has many enemies, and it is not hard to acquire nuclear weapons; and, to any enemy so armed, Britain would then offer the same temptation as Japan did to America in 1945. Is it likely that her enemies would always resist that temptation? To ask this question is to answer it.

These objections are so very obvious that Kenny cannot have been unaware of them, and so serious that he ought to have tried to answer them. But he does not. Here is a representative specimen of what he offers instead. "The worst-case outcome of deterrence,

This essay first appeared in 1987 as a review of Anthony Kenny's *The Ivory Tower: Essays in Philosophy and Public Policy*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985. It has been slightly abridged.
—Ed.

nuclear devastation, is so much more catastrophic than the worst-case outcome of disarmament, Russian domination, that the course which leads to it should be avoided no matter what the probabilities of the two outcomes on the different strategies.”¹

For impudent falsity, this will take some beating. The worst possible outcome of disarmament is, quite obviously, not Russian domination, but the same as the worst possible outcome of deterrence—namely, nuclear devastation, by the Russians or by someone else.

The same obvious untruth is repeated when Kenny discusses the old question whether it is better to be “red or dead.” Common sense would suggest that the West has succeeded for forty years in avoiding *both* these dreaded alternatives and that this is some reason to believe that we have been doing something right and may even be able to continue avoiding both alternatives. But of course this is not at all the way Kenny sees things. “For our nations to be reduced to the status of Romania would be far less of a disaster than for all our cities to be reduced to the condition of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.”² In fact, this obvious untruth—that the “Romanian solution” is the worst possible outcome of disarmament—is a recurring theme of these essays and the author’s pet delusion.

Orwell observed long ago—and indeed it is not hard to detect—that the emotional fuel of pacifism is actually a secret admiration for superior military strength. It is likewise not hard to detect in Kenny’s delusion a secret yearning for that very Russian embrace that he believes he dreads. The Romanian solution is not really, in his mind, a second best. On the contrary, like many other British intellectuals, he has been mentally living in Romania for decades.

But what are the *arguments* (as distinct from the wish) behind Kenny’s policy? *Why*, according to him, should Britain throw away her nuclear arms? The first argument that Kenny gives is this: that the use of nuclear weapons would kill millions of innocent people and thereby “violate an *absolute divine* prohibition,”³ “the *divine command* against killing the innocent.”⁴

There now, that took you back a bit, didn’t it? As well it might. But I should explain that these quotations come from an essay that, though reprinted here, was first published as long ago as 1962. At that time Kenny was a Catholic and presumably took divine commands seriously. He is not a Catholic now, and in the introduction⁵ he hints that he himself does not now subscribe to this particular

argument. Still, this has not stopped him from trotting it out, twenty-three years on, for the sake of whatever influence it might still be able to exert. This is a strong instance of the vanity of authors at least. Whether it is not also an instance of something like pious fraud it would be unsympathetic to inquire.

His second argument is an appeal to “the principle, basic to European morality since its enunciation by Socrates, that it is better to undergo wrong than to do wrong.”⁶

“Basic to European morality since Socrates” forsooth! This is just cheek, of course, and an attempt to invest one’s own crotchets with the authority of all history. It is very much in the manner of an earlier Master of Balliol, the omniscient Benjamin Jowett, and this kind of thing may even now, for all I know, do to bluff Oxford undergraduates. It will not do here, though, because, first, the principles stated is quite obviously *not* basic to European morality. Second, if it were, that would not even begin to show that it is a good principle. Third, it is obviously not a good principle. (It is of course a perfectly good *pacifist* principle, or at least its special case applied to warfare is; but then, Kenny says he is not a pacifist.)

Kenny’s main argument for disarmament, however, is just the following very simple one: that to use, or even possess, weapons for the mass destruction of the innocent, is *immoral*, *wicked*. This he says from the outset, and this is what he comes back to, using these very same words, time after time in these essays.

Sancta simplicitas! At least, I hope that that is what this is. Yet it is hard to believe that so accomplished a philosopher as Kenny does not know the elementary logical truth—namely, that “we ought not to do X” does not follow from “X is immoral.” The reason it does not follow is that there can be “choice-of-evils” cases: cases, that is, in which (1) we ought to do something, (2) doing X is immoral, and (3) doing anything else is at least as immoral as doing X. That such cases are at any rate *logically* possible, no one, perhaps, will deny. That they are not only possible, but actual, and indeed common, is something that even a modest experience of life suffices to teach most people. And that the case of nuclear weapons *is* a choice-of-evils case seems to me to be a truth so obvious that even a philosopher might have been expected to see it.

Until philosophers are kings, Plato said, human affairs will never go right. This is true; only one should add that they never go more

wrong than when philosophers *are* kings. Historical accidents fortunately spared mankind the world rule to which Plato, Comte, and countless other philosopher-megalomaniacs aspired. But our luck ran out at last. In 1917 the throne of the Russian Empire was successfully usurped by a philosopher—with what catastrophic consequences for the world at large it is hardly necessary to state.

Kenny is not, of course, one of the philosophers who aspire to world rule. But he shares the unerringly disastrous political impulses of those who do. I do not believe that, if you took at random twenty common men from English streets, you would find one whose opinions on the momentous subject of nuclear weapons are as silly, or as dangerous, as those of the respected philosopher who wrote this book.

Notes

1. Anthony Kenny, *The Ivory Tower*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985, p. 115.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 90, but almost exactly the same sentence, with the same reference to Romania, occurs again on page 115.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 116, and is repeated elsewhere.

12

Jobs for the Girls

The staff of Sydney University have lately all been sent a leaflet, entitled "Equal Employment Opportunity Statement." It is signed by the Vice-Chancellor, and was accompanied by a letter from him, which states that the leaflet was prepared by a committee of the Senate of the University, and by the University's "Equal Employment Opportunity Unit."

The leaflet does not disappoint the expectations which, coming from such a source, it naturally arouses. That is, it is all jargon, inconsistency, and evasiveness. And yet, somehow, every member of staff understands perfectly well what it means! It purports to be for the benefit of all conceivable classes of victims of "discrimination"; and yet, again, everyone on the staff somehow knows well enough that one *particular* class of beneficiaries is especially intended. No, Virginia, there isn't really any Santa Claus, and this leaflet isn't really about jobs for the lame, or the black, or the Vietnamese, or even the homosexuals. It is about jobs for the girls.

The University's official policy, as late as last year, was a simple one: the best candidate should be appointed. Well, the present leaflet, which is as official as anything could be, not only does *not* say that, or anything like it; it implies, as clearly as possible, the opposite. For it expressly identifies women, and women alone, as having been in fact discriminated against unfairly (even if only "indirectly") in the past; and it calls for the setting of "numerical targets together with a timetable for their achievement," in order to "redress" this past discrimination. Translating from feminese into English, this means: "at least half the staff must soon be women." And this mes-

sage is so loud and clear that it is now being understood, as I say, even by the most dull-witted members of the staff.

Actually the message is rather worse than that. For the leaflet says that "past discrimination requires redress by ... providing programmes for members of groups who have been disadvantaged." You have to admire the wonderful evasiveness of that word "programmes." It *could* mean musical programmes, perhaps, or TV programmes? But no, Virginia, what I have just quoted is feminese for: "*more than half* of the jobs must be for the girls."

Lord Melbourne once said that, of all his honors, the one he liked best was the Garter, because there was no damned nonsense about merit attached to it. Apparently we will soon be able to say the same thing about appointments at Sydney University.

When is *der Tag*? The leaflet does not say. Rumor says 1990, and that is likely enough. Anyway, it is certainly not far off. And by that time, unless the provisions of this leaflet can be evaded, there will just *have* to be an awful lot of jobs at Sydney which go to women without any nonsense about merit. A certain amount of this has been going on for some years already, at Sydney and elsewhere, as I said in last September's *Quadrant*.^{*} But to meet the "timetable" it will have to be increased enormously.

How is the University to be compelled to comply? Easily. Not by direct legislation: that could be troublesome, and is quite unnecessary. It will be done by governments threatening to cut off money. At another university in New South Wales, the head of a school has already been told unofficially, by his Vice-Chancellor, that there will be no government money for his school after 1990, if half of its staff are not by then women. This was over a year ago, and no doubt it will be the pattern for the future. Since universities get virtually no money except government money, they are, of course, quite unable to resist this kind of threat.

The key to the whole situation, therefore, is feminist pressure on governments. The quality of university staff is sure to be disastrously worsened, unless that pressure can somehow be reduced.

But how is this to be done? Our governments care little about what happens in universities. Why should they? Every farmer,

^{*}See David Stove, "The Feminists and the Universities," *Quadrant*, vol. 28, no. 9 (September, 1984), p. 8, and "Universities and Feminists Once More," *Quadrant*, vol. 28, no. 11 (November, 1984), p. 60.—Ed.

every employer of labor, every policeman, is a person who is of some use; but you cannot say the same of one professor, or one student, in twenty. It is unreasonable to expect democratically elected ministers to care much, if mathematics and philosophy and physics are put into progressively more incompetent hands. And then, think of Ministers, beset in their offices (and likely enough at home too) by feminist furies: their chief anxiety must naturally be to escape the noise. Small wonder if they surrender, especially since it is absent third parties who suffer the consequences of their surrender.

If it comes to that, how many people are there, even outside governments, who will do so much as publicly to call themselves anti-feminists? Mary McCarthy said of Lillian Hellman that every word she wrote was a lie, including "a" and "the." Similarly, I say that contemporary feminism is not 64 percent, not 97 percent, but *all* rubbish, and destructive rubbish at that. But how many will (except in private!) agree with me? I will be lucky if my motion even finds someone to second it.

These things being so, the prospect before us at Sydney University is dark indeed. I see no hope, in fact, except from the possibility that the real world may intrude upon the campus, in the shape of national poverty. Feminism is a disease of the rich: it is born of idleness, hence of leisure, hence of money. The sheer pressure of actuality immunizes poor people against feminist vapors. Now Australia is, by all the indications, rapidly becoming a poor country. The conservationists, the anti-nuclears, and the Aborigines, are seeing to that, along with the ever increasing extravagance of our governments, and the ever increasing laziness of the bulk of the population. Is there not some hope, then, that jobs-for-the-girls will come to be recognized as a luxury we cannot afford? That feminism will be blown away by the wind of poverty, and (as the poet sings), "leave not a wrack behind"?

I think there is some hope of this. But very little. Easily the most likely outcome is the combination of evils: that we will have poverty *and* rampant feminism. This is certainly the future which the present leaflet pre-figures. It calmly promises the provision of such million dollar trifles as "adequate child care facilities" for hundreds of feminist mums. And all of that is before you even come to the main business: the "Equal Employment Opportunity Management Plan." (No, I am not making this up.) This will obviously require a very

large staff. Indeed, the Equal Employment Opportunity Unit, although its operations could hardly be said to have begun yet, already has a staff of three, with two more positions currently being advertised. And when you consider that the Unit's "Review of Staff Utilisation and Personnel Practices" is not only going to be "continuing," but must comprehend the Unit *itself*, as well as the many thousands of other staff—well, anyone can see that the sky's the limit. To assure your children's economic future, put them into feminism. I seem to hear a lot of my friends plaintively asking, "But what money, or even rooms, will be left over for physics, or philosophy, or mathematics?" Friend, do not ask for whom the feminist bell tolls: it tolls for thee.

Why do I say that this worst possible outcome is also the likeliest? Simply because the causes which are at work are all of them (as far as experience enables us to judge) irreversible ones. Industrious populations have often evolved into lazy ones, but never the other way about. Successive governments, even when they promise to spend less (*i.e.* tax less) than their predecessors, in fact spend more—*always*. And finally, the feminist virus never spontaneously remits, but on the contrary absorbs its hosts at an ever increasing rate. It could not be otherwise. Nothing, not even heroin, is more stimulating, or more addictive, than hate, and that is the fuel that feminism runs on.

The cream of the jest is that women in Australia never *were* unfairly treated in competition for university jobs; so that there never was an injustice to be "redressed." I said this in the September 1984 *Quadrant*, and the feminists, though they raised a considerable squall about my article, were distinctly reluctant to contest this particular claim. It is not contested in this leaflet either, even by implication.

In fact the *only* discrimination against women which even the writers of this leaflet can come up with is the "*indirect* discrimination" (as they call it), arising from the burdens which fall only or mainly on women, "of childbearing, child rearing, and other family responsibilities."

Yet it is a mere abuse of language, of course, to call this discrimination at all; and it would be easily recognized as such in any other case. Fatherhood, too, for example almost inevitably brings burdens of its own, and fathers, therefore, whether as holders of or candidates for university jobs, have always been at some disadvantage

compared with bachelors. But no one would dream of saying, on that account, that the University has discriminated against fathers. Or take sickness. Poor health, too, is a burden, and a cruel one, on anyone holding or aspiring to a university job. But no one would say on that account that the University has been guilty of discrimination in favor of healthy people, or call on the University to “redress” its past discrimination against the sick. Yet that is essentially the feminist inference: that is the reason why the quality of university staff must be made worse than it would otherwise be. God almighty, what tripe!

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13

Righting Wrongs

In his autobiography Bertrand Russell mentions many brilliant people he had known at Cambridge early in the century. But one of these, John Maynard Keynes, left on him a unique impression of intellectual force. “Keynes’s intellect was the sharpest and clearest I have ever known. When I argued with him, I felt that I took my life in my hands, and I seldom emerged without feeling something of a fool.”¹

This is impressive testimony indeed. It is confirmed by something that Keynes said about Russell in “My Early Beliefs,” an essay on the Cambridge-Bloomsbury circle to which they had both belonged in the early 1900s. Looking back after thirty-odd years, Keynes is contemptuous of the superficiality of that circle’s political and psychological ideas. But Russell’s political ideas, he implies, were outstanding for silliness even in that company. “Bertie in particular sustained simultaneously a pair of opinions ludicrously incompatible. He held that in fact human affairs were carried on after a most irrational fashion, but that the remedy was quite simple and easy, since all we had to do was to carry them on rationally.”²

Just two effortless sentences, and yet how fatal they are to any belief in Russell’s political wisdom, or even sense! They are like a bayonet thrust through the heart and out the back. Russell was not only a fool in Helsinki in 1967, “trying” America for its “war crimes” in Vietnam: he was a fool even in 1903.

Professional logicians might question—I know, alas, some who certainly would question—whether the two opinions which Keynes ascribes to Russell are incompatible, strictly speaking. Well, that sort

This essay first appeared in 1988. It has been slightly abridged.—Ed.

of thing is the logicians' livelihood, and it would be unkind to try to deprive them of it. Let us call the conjunction of Russell's two opinions *absurd* rather than incompatible, if this will buy for us the silence of those Russellian progeny, the contemporary logicians. And absurd, at least, that conjunction certainly is.

But the absurdity is one that is very far from being peculiar to Russell. It has afflicted countless other people as well, and its favorite victims are people who are, as Russell was, intelligent, educated, and "concerned." It is, in fact, the characteristic absurdity of the utopianism which came in with the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.

The past, according to this utopianism, is unspeakably dark, the future unspeakably bright. Yet how can this be? Unless the change is simply a miracle, there must be some natural cause or causes which bring it about. If the past is so uniformly dark, how can it have brought us to "the shores of light"? It is no good gesturing at this or that particular person or event: Newton, or Luther, or Columbus, or the invention of printing. The more one knows about any such apparent singularities, the more they merge insensibly into their historical background. Utopianism, in order to justify its own destructiveness, *has* to paint the past as so bad, and the future as so good, as to make it an insoluble mystery how the one can give birth to the other.

Condorcet and Godwin—to take the two most typical utopians of the Enlightenment—are utterly helpless in the face of this simple but fundamental objection. They are as exposed as Russell was to Keynes' devastating reproach. They simply had no explanation, where they needed one most: of how darkness gives rise to light. Any explanation would have been better than none. For example, they could have said that God, at a certain point in time, simply changes men's hearts for the better. This would not have been a good explanation, of course, and is indeed the very kind of thing which the Enlightenment claimed to have outgrown. But it would have been better than nothing.

In this respect, the utopians of the next generation, such as Saint-Simon and Comte, represent very little advance. Marx, however, to his credit, did offer an explanation, and an explanation in naturalistic terms, of the transition from darkness to light. It is a result, he said of *economic* causes, which are working themselves out quite independently of anyone's wishes or beliefs; and economic causes will install the classless society with the same inevitability as they once installed feudal, and then bourgeois, society.

It need hardly be said that Marx's theory will not survive five minutes' scrutiny. His distinction between the economic "base" and the ideological "superstructure" just will not stand up, and his idea of "relations to the means of production" is embarrassingly vague. But Marx did have the great merit of perceiving that his utopian predecessors and rivals had *no mechanism at all* to suggest. They just thought, like Russell, that it would be much nicer if everything were much nicer, and that there is nothing, after all, to stop us making everything much nicer, since all that is needed is for us all to be much nicer, more reasonable, kinder, etc. This is, of course, the logic of dreams and of childish religion. In *The Pilgrim's Progress*, for example, Christian, after being long imprisoned in Doubting Castle by the Giant Despair, wakes up one morning and suddenly realizes that he has had the key to his prison in his pocket all along.

* * *

The preceding remarks have contemporary as well as historical application. For Enlightenment utopianism is by now the unofficial religion of all, or nearly all, the rulers of the free world.

Everyone knows who the real rulers of the free world were twenty years ago: those students and professors in American universities who fought for withdrawal from Vietnam. Superficial observers imagine that things are very different now: that those rulers have been turned out and reduced to comparative impotence. It is not so. The Vietnam catastrophe was due not to any defeat or disaffection of America's armed forces, but to an enormous revolution in feeling at home: a revolution comparable in scale with the one which divided the Jazz Age from the pre-1914 world. Revolutions in feeling on this scale are as irreversible as changes in the tectonic plates of continents, and this one has certainly not been reversed.

In 1987, as in 1967, the rulers of the free world are professors, graduates, and students of morally—and intellectually—ruinous universities, who read and write the *New York Times*, the *Guardian* in Britain, and the *Sydney Morning Herald* in Australia, and who control the content of local television. Many of these people despise those organs of publicity as being hopelessly reactionary. Still, they and their publicity organs are really of the same religion.

The substance of this religion is as follows. The world—or rather, the free world (for this religion has nothing to say about any other)—is one huge festering mass of wrongs: wrongs against native populations, racial minorities, women, children, animals, the environment, etc., all perpetrated by men, whites, parents, developers, etc.; wrongs deep and immemorial, wrongs inevitable in the past no doubt, but inexcusable now. *All these wrongs must be righted now.* We are free to do it, and ought not wrongs to be righted? Indeed (such is the logic of utopianism), the *more* inevitable a wrong was in the past, the more imperative it is that it be righted in the present.

You see the metaphysical gulf which this religion implies, between the past, on the one hand, and the present and future, on the other; and in particular between all past human beings and *Us*, the enlightened ones of the present. *They* were all subject to Necessity, but *We* are Free. They lived under Nature, *We* live under Grace. They were not agents at all but mere patients, while *We* are pure agents and not patients at all. They, in darkness, could not but do the wrongs they did, but *We*, in the light, are free to right those wrongs.

The absurdity of this utopianism is only, of course, the absurdity of a Clarence Darrow defense writ large. “Your Honor, when my client shot the bank clerk, he was simply the helpless victim of his circumstances, his upbringing etc., exactly as the unfortunate bank clerk was. But you and I, Your Honor, are not: we are free, and should exercise this freedom, not to punish my client, but to acquit and reform him.”

What can one say of a religion so absurd, except that it is absurd? After all, the parents who brought up the bank robber had parents themselves; so if their offspring was never a free agent, neither were they. If bank robbers are helpless victims of circumstances, so are judges who punish them; if the judges are free, so are the bank robbers. All human beings, at whatever time, live under the same Nature, or the same Grace. To imagine that there was Necessity for Them then, but that there is Freedom for Us now, is to sever human life and history into two utterly discontinuous parts: a severance to which nothing corresponds, or could correspond, in reality.

But this religion, unlike some others, is even more dangerous than it is absurd. For it licenses its devotees, or rather it actually requires them, to satisfy their “hunger and thirst after righteousness,” regardless of the possibility that their actions will have unforeseen and

undesirable consequences. Indeed, it actually makes a virtue of recklessness: *fiat iustitia ruat caelum*, “Let justice triumph though the heavens fall.” Yet one of the most certain lessons of life is that our actions very often have unforeseen and unwelcome consequences, even, or rather especially, when they are well intentioned.

Notes

1. Bertrand Russell, *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, Vol. 1: 1872-1914, Boston, Toronto: Little, Brown and Co., 1967, p. 97.
2. John Maynard Keynes, *Essays and Sketches in Biography* (1951), New York: Meridian Books, 1956, p. 255.

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14

Why You should be a Conservative

A primitive society is being devastated by a disease, so you bring modern medicine to bear, and wipe out the disease, only to find that by doing so you have brought on a population explosion. You introduce contraception to control population, and find that you have dismantled a whole culture. At home you legislate to relieve the distress of unmarried mothers, and find you have given a cash incentive to the production of illegitimate children. You guarantee a minimum wage, and find that you have extinguished, not only specific industries, but industry itself as a personal trait. You enable everyone to travel, and one result is, that there is nowhere left worth travelling to. And so on.

This is the oldest and the best argument for conservatism: the argument from the fact that our actions almost always have unforeseen and unwelcome consequences. It is an argument from so great and so mournful a fund of experience, that nothing can rationally outweigh it. Yet somehow, at any rate in societies like ours, this argument never is given its due weight. When what is called a “reform” proves to be, yet again, a cure worse than the disease, the assumption is *always* that what is needed is still more, and still more drastic, “reform.”

Why are people so unhappy? According to Malthus, the main causes of human misery are famine, war, and pestilence. Surely this is an amazingly external view of the matter? If it were true, then at this moment most thirty-year-old citizens of New York, London, or

This essay first appeared in 1988. It has been abridged. Originally it contained three parts. The first of these appeared in print during Stove's lifetime as “The Columbus Argument.” It is reprinted in this volume under the same title. Half of part two appeared in print, again during Stove's lifetime, as “Rightings Wrongs.” It, too, is reprinted in this volume. The remainder of the original essay appears here in this chapter under its original title.—Ed.

Sydney, since they have not the remotest experience of famine, war, or pestilence, must be about as happy as human beings can be. Does anyone think this is true? Those persons themselves, at any rate, are deeply convinced that it is not true; which would be enough in itself to make it not true, even if there were no other factor in the case. A view like Malthus' completely overlooks a certain *internal* peculiarity of *Homo sapiens*: that he is equipped not only with a thermostat, but with a "miserostat," which always keeps his discontent up, not indeed to a constant level, but at least to a certain minimum level, and a high one at that.

But even as to external causes of misery, Malthus' list omits one which, at any rate in our century, is at least as important as war, famine, or pestilence. This cause is, in addition, actually responsible for most of our wars and famines. I mean benevolence.

There are a million examples one could give, drawn from the effects of "welfare" legislation on societies like ours, from the effects of western technology on primitive societies, and so on. But I will go at once to the biggest and most obvious example of all: twentieth-century communism. This is an evil so appalling that some ignorant or superstitious people believe that its psychological roots can only lie in Satanism, or even in Satan himself. But in sober fact it is beyond question that the psychological root of twentieth-century communism is benevolence. Lenin, Stalin, and the rest, would not have done what they did, but for the fact that they began by wishing the human race well. Communists differ, of course, from other Friends of Humanity, in certain beliefs that they have about the conditions necessary for achieving human happiness. But the emotional *fuel* of communism has always been the same as the emotional fuel of all utopianisms: the passionate wish to abolish or alleviate human misery.

And yet everyone knows what the actual effects of communism are. They are an unprecedented level and extent of misery wherever the communists have triumphed; and wherever they are actively resisted, inextinguishable war, and in many cases famine as well.

When I say that these are among the effects of benevolence, I mean, of course, a benevolence which takes humanity as a whole for its object. To be a little more analytical, I mean a state of mind which not only puts universal benevolence first among moral obligations, but *puts morality first* altogether.

It is important to realize that it is only the combination of these two elements which is so powerful a cause of modern misery. Either element on its own is almost always comparatively harmless. A person who is convinced that he has a moral obligation to be benevolent, but who in fact ranks morality below fame (say), or ease; or again, a person who puts morality first, but is also convinced that the supreme moral obligation is, not to be benevolent, but to be holy (say), or wise, or creative: either of these people *might* turn out to be a scourge of his fellow humans, though in most cases he will not. But even at the worst, the misery which such a person causes will fall incomparably short of the misery caused by Lenin, or Stalin, or Mao, or Ho Chi Minh, or Kim I-Sung, or Pol Pot, or Castro: persons convinced *both* of the supremacy of benevolence among moral obligations, and of the supremacy of morality among all things. It is this *combination* which is infallibly and enormously destructive of human happiness.

The free world's trouble is that this lethal combination is by no means peculiar to the communists. On the contrary, it is shared by those Enlightenment utopians who (as I was saying earlier) are the *de facto* rulers of the free world, and have been so for more than twenty years. These people, of course, are not communists, if only because they have never yet made even that intellectual advance which (as I said) separates Marx's "scientific socialism" from "utopian socialism." But they are, for the reason I have just mentioned, almost as dangerous as the communists.

That our primary obligation is to increase human happiness, or decrease misery, is an idea only of the last ten minutes, historically speaking. The human race in general has always supposed that its primary moral obligation lies elsewhere: in being holy, or in being virtuous, or in practicing some specific virtue: loyalty or courage, for example. An obligation to increase the general happiness has occupied little if any place in most moral systems, whether of the learned or of the ignorant. But for the contemporaries of whom I am speaking, anything morally more important than human happiness is simply inconceivable. You can easily tell that this is so, by asking any of them to mention an example of something which they regard as extremely morally bad. You will find that what they give, *in every case*, is an example which turns essentially on *pain*.

And then, these are also people who put morality first. You can easily tell that this is so, because (as I implied earlier) these people all suppose that it is a *rhetorical* question, "Ought not wrongs to be righted?" Yet it is nothing of the kind; and this is a point at which logic can for once say something worth remembering.

It does not follow, from something's being morally wrong, that it ought to be removed. It does not follow that it would be morally preferable if that thing did not exist. It does not even follow that we have any moral obligation to *try to* remove it. X might be wrong, yet every alternative to X be as wrong as X is, or more wrong. It might be that even any attempt to remove X is as wrong as X is, or more so. It might be that every alternative to X, and any attempt to remove X, though not itself wrong, inevitably has effects which are as wrong as X, or worse. The inference fails yet again if (as most philosophers believe) "ought" implies "can." For in that case there are at least some evils, namely the necessary evils, which no one can have any obligation to remove.

These are purely logical truths. But they are also truths which, at most periods of history, common experience of life has brought home to everyone of even moderate intelligence. That almost every decision is a choice among evils; that the best is the inveterate enemy of the good; that the road to hell is paved with good intentions: such proverbial *dicta* are among the most certain, as well as the most widely known, lessons of experience. But somehow or other, complete immunity to them is at once conferred upon anyone who attends a modern university.

In 1967, what were the student opponents of the American involvement in Vietnam most admired for? Why, for their "idealism"—everyone knows that. This meant, essentially, that they needed to be convinced *only* that that involvement was wrong, in order to conclude, at once and with certainty, that it ought to be ended, no matter what the consequences might be. This may or may not have been idealism, I do not know; but I do know that it was bad logic. The teachers of those students could have done both an intellectual and a public service by pointing out the fallacy. But I do not think they often did.

It should go without saying that conservatives will often *mistakenly believe* that a certain evil is a necessary one, or that the alternatives to it are all at least as bad, or that any attempt to remove it will

have consequences even worse. Such mistakes are, of course, the very staple of the rhetoric of "reformers," and they are indeed common. But we must simply "divide through" for them, because it is certain that the opposite mistakes are made at least as often by the other side. There is, admittedly, one asymmetry between the two sides, in that the conservative will have more often than the utopian reformer has, an *interest* in the matter, something personally to lose by any attempt to remove a certain evil. But even this asymmetry is cancelled out by another one: that the conservative is more likely to be right, because personal interest often *sharpens* intellectual perceptions, whereas the "hunger and thirst after righteousness" always dulls them.

* * *

Most of this essay has so far been general, and some of it even philosophical. I criticized the only general argument for anti-conservatism that I know of, and my main objection to Enlightenment utopianism was, the metaphysical gulf which it implies between the past and the present. In support of conservatism I advanced the empirical argument from the probability of our actions having unforeseen and unwelcome consequences; and I made the logical point that it does not follow, from something's being wrong or evil, that the world would be better without it. Both of these are very general arguments for conservatism: they retain their force at any time and in any circumstances. But it would be absurd for me, even though I am a philosopher, to omit altogether the *special* argument for conservatism which is supplied by our present social situation.

In order to meet my opponents on the only ground they feel at ease on, I will say nothing about our present situation *except* in its happiness-misery dimension. I will leave aside all the questions of value, and speak only of facts. I will even avoid raising any question of *future* fact: for example, whether a society such as ours now is can survive ten years. Only facts, then; only facts, even at that, about happiness or its opposite; and only present or past facts.

There are many determinants of human happiness, and some are not only internal but private, and hardly accessible at all to public knowledge. But there are others which are external, public, and even obvious. Let us consider just two of the most obvious determinants

of the happiness or misery of a society: respect for human life, and respect for property. Both of these things might be present in the highest degree, of course, and the society still be very miserable: that would depend on what other factors were at work. But a society *must* be the more miserable, the less respect there is either for life or for property; and where either is very low, a society is sure to be very miserable, no matter what other factors are at work.

How are we placed then, here and now, for respect for human life and property, compared with a hundred, or fifty, or twenty-five years ago? Since everyone knows the answer to this question, there is no need for many words about it. But a few of the relevant facts must be mentioned.

Take respect for property first. Every school, every phone booth, indeed every public building or installation, if it is not permanently guarded or a fortress, is now damaged, or burgled, or disfigured, as a matter of almost-daily routine. Every private dwelling or place of work is burgled frequently if it is not a fortress, sometimes even if it is. The police, naturally enough, now take only a tepid interest in resisting a flood of crime which they could not stem even if their force were ten times bigger than it is, even if they were themselves free from all complicity in crime. The insurers of property increasingly recognize that the institution of insurance, like steam-locomotion and respect for women, belongs to a vanished world, and is vanishing itself just as inevitably.

Then, as to respect for human life. In the street, in public transport, even at home, every child, every woman, every man who is not a criminal of middle or higher rank, is exposed to a degree of risk of assault, rape, or murder, to which no parallel exists outside the free world, or has existed previously in the free world, other than in time of war or occupation, and only exceptionally even then. In every leafy suburb, though a local government order prevents you from taking, even in your own backyard, the life of one tree, hundreds of young humans disappear down toilets every day. Almost every family now feels the effects of the disregard for life which is displayed by drug users and drug suppliers alike. Homosexual males insist upon their right to endanger the lives of any other people indifferently, whether they be other homosexuals, ambulance or hospital staff, or mere by-standers; and they insist so effectively that doctors, who are required by law to notify the public health authori-

ties of the identity of a carrier of any other communicable disease, are forbidden by law to do so in the case of carriers of AIDS.

It would be merely tiresome to extend this catalogue of facts so excessively familiar. But they are also facts which are, every one of them, *extremely new*. These things either did not exist at all, or nothing remotely comparable to them in scale existed, a hundred years ago, or fifty, or even twenty-five years ago. The fact is, this precipitous decline in respect for life and property dates precisely from the accession to power of those new rulers of ours, of whom I spoke earlier; and the decline has gone on *pari passu* with the extension and consolidation of their rule, for the last twenty-two-or-so years.

If some one can believe that this coincidence in time is a *mere* coincidence, it will be hardly worth while to argue with him. It is obvious enough that the internal dissolution of the free countries, and the external irresolution which overtook them at the same time, are two effects of a common cause: that geological shift of feeling which took place in 1965-70, and began on the playing fields (or the footpaths, to be exact), of Berkeley.

This here-and-now argument for conservatism would be cancelled out, of course, if another list could be compiled to match the ones I just gave: a list of other ways in which, in the same period, happiness in our societies has been obviously and massively *increased* as it has been decreased by the decline of respect for life and property. But can such a list be compiled?

I am not so despairing of societies like our own as to believe that they have made no progress at all in happiness between 1967 and 1987. On the contrary, I am convinced that there has been real, even if only patchy, progress in this dimension. Beneficiaries of the drug trade, for example, are certainly happier now than they or their counterparts were in 1967; likewise beneficiaries of the trade in pornographic videos; likewise KGB employees fortunate enough to be posted among us. But these are all classes which are numerically small in relation to the population as a whole and, even if they are put together, their increased happiness will hardly begin to offset the general increase in misery resulting from the steep decline in respect for life and property.

Will anyone suggest, I wonder, that in our societies the happiness of men, or of children, or of women themselves, has been on balance increased by the feminist convulsion? This could hardly be

other than a joke, and an inexcusably cruel joke at that, which one look at the face of one of the convulsionaries should be enough to repress. In any case it is obvious that feminism is itself a major cause of the decline in legal security and physical security which women have undergone in the last twenty-five years.

Well, *can* anyone compile a list of positives to match the list of negatives I have? From my point of view the matter is of secondary importance, because even if some one can, it will offset only the local argument, not the general arguments, for conservatism. All the same, I am confident it cannot be done. Any takers?

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