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Stove, Hume, and Enlightenment

THE DRUIDS WERE no doubt tempted to make as big a production as they could of the ceremonies at the winter solstice, since bringing back the year was all they could do. Just so, David Stove thought, the Enlightened persistently exaggerated the evils that humankind labours under as a result of priestcraft and superstition. Those were the only evils they knew how to cure. True, they promised that the advance of reason would cure wooden legs and old age, eliminate the need for hard work, and relieve all the other ills of the species, but in the eighteenth century, before the industrial and medical revolutions, those promises were even more hollow than they are today.

Review of *On Enlightenment*, by David Stove, edited with an introduction by Andrew Irvine (Transaction Publishers, Somerset, New Jersey, 2002). Original source: *Sophia* 42 (2) (October 2003), pp. 135-6.

But was the Enlightenment's abolition of 'superstition' an unalloyed blessing, or did it bring with it equal or worse evils? That is exactly the sort of question that was not on its agenda. In contrast to Leibniz's Best of All Possible Worlds theory, which is entirely about how the necessary interconnections between evils makes it hard to remove all of them at once, the shallowness of the Enlightened consisted especially in their invincible optimism that eliminating evils is easy. Voltaire's *Candide* portrays Leibniz as a fatuous optimist, but he was not in the same class as Voltaire himself and his allies. Superstition? Mock it and the dark clouds of blind faith will evaporate, leaving the masses carefree atheists. Political oppression? Overthrow the tyrants and the rule of the people will usher in a golden age of liberty, equality and fraternity. Economic inequality? Let the workers throw off their chains and communism will see the state wither away. Imperialism? A paper tiger. Economic inefficiency? Let the state and its virtuous bureaucrats plan the allocation of resources for the good of all. No matter if some of these plans contradict human nature, or one another. Reason can keep itself occupied sorting out any loose ends.

Almost every twentieth century intellectual was a man of the Enlightenment, but David Stove more so than most. His technical work in philosophy was on Hume's arguments about induction, and he regarded Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* as an unsurpassed and unanswerable demolition of the claims

of religion. Humans, he thought, have no greater hope of immortality than any other land mammal. Where Stove differed from the Enlightened was in being unable to delight in the results of the end of faith. He belonged to the tradition of pessimism about 'progress'. The first to blow the whistle on the facile optimism of the men of Reason (unless one counts the practical demonstrations of the Terror of 1793) were Joseph de Maistre and Malthus. De Maistre's remark about Rousseau, 'You might as well say sheep are born carnivorous, but everywhere they eat grass', exposed the difficulties in the Enlightenment's assumption of the infinite malleability of human nature ('it's all a question of education'). Malthus – the subject of one of the essays in this collection – showed the problems that would arise if Reason did eliminate the evils of war, vice, pestilence and famine: namely, more war, vice, pestilence and famine caused by over-population. Later high points in the tradition include Sir James Fitzjames Stephen's attack on John Stuart Mill (Stephen's victory in argument and defeat in practice is described in Roger Kimball's aptly named *Experiments Against Reality*) and Keynes' summary of the absurdity in Bertrand Russell's hyper-Enlightenment views: '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.' Hayek's arguments on the inevitable failure of state planning were an

application of the same line of thinking in social and political theory – a field touched on in the same vein by Stove in his essays ‘Righting Wrongs’ and ‘Why You Should Be a Conservative’, reprinted in this collection.

Good arguments certainly, but, as Stove was honest enough to ask, were there not some grounds to support the forces of Progress in their optimism, at least in the West? Has not progress actually happened, in many ways, as the Enlightened predicted? They enjoyed, Stove said, a series of lucky accidents. The Industrial Revolution – not of their making – came along at just the right time. When they sent an ill-planned colony to the ends of the earth, devised on their principles, it was saved from the disaster it richly deserved by the efforts of a Spanish-bred sheep, as described in John Gascoigne’s *The Enlightenment and the Origins of European Australia*. Malthusian disasters were later staved off by such unlooked-for developments as the electric motor and contraception. Can it go on?

To return to religion, and the question as to whether the abolition of superstition did anyone any good. Stove quotes Hume’s opponent James Beattie, ‘in the solitary scenes of life, there is many an honest and tender heart pining with incurable anguish ... racked with disease, scourged by the oppressor; whom nothing but trust in Providence, and the hope of future 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 ... ?’ Stove comments, ‘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? If they had said that one must, sadly, prefer the hard truth to consolation, that would have been understandable. But that is far from what they said, as they believed in the happy harmony of all goods.

The religious will not find any consolation in Stove's work. Neither will the village atheist heirs of the Enlightenment.

