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David Stove (1927-1994), Sydney philosopher and master of argument: life and work

Life

David Stove was born in Moree in 1927 and grew up in Newcastle, where his father was a schoolteacher. At Sydney University in the late 1940s he came under the strong influence of John Anderson, along with people like David Armstrong, with whom he became very friendly,

Stove gives one of the most memorable recollections of Anderson’s impact on students:

The influence Anderson exercised was purely, or as purely as a human influence can be felt, intellectual. I never felt anything like the force of his intellect. Disagreeing with Anderson was (to compare it with something most people have experienced), like playing chess with someone altogether above your own class. Your strongest pieces are, you cannot tell how, drained of all their powers, while on *his* side even a pawn can do unheard-of things; and as though by invisible giant fingers, you are quickly crushed.¹

It is characteristic of Stove that what interests him about Anderson is not his force of personality or his radical conclusions but the strength of his arguments. Evaluation of argument was to be the centre of Stove’s professional life.

And if Anderson’s influence was intellectually strong, it was, Stove thought, morally dubious:

The accusations against him of “corrupting the youth” were an unfailing cause for derision from him and from us when we were the youth concerned. I now think that these accusations were true in some cases. To give an example: as undergraduates and even later, some of my circle, who would not have done so but for the influence of Anderson’s philosophy of morals, took up shoplifting ... If you convince the intelligent young that the very notions of “wrong” and “right” are “confused” and “illogical” — well, what would you expect?

Conversely, Anderson was by no means very impressed with Stove. In a letter to Ruth Walker he wrote, “The fact is that both David’s are weak in logic – D.C.S[tove], because he doesn’t have the training, D.M.A[rmstrong], congenitally.”²

He indulged in some of the usual activism of the time, being president of the 1950 Anti-Conscription Committee that was a significant ancestor of the Push.³ Thereafter he moved in a strongly conservative direction. In his case, that may have been partly an expression of a somewhat depressive temperament,

¹ D.C. Stove, The force of intellect, *Quadrant* 21 (7) (July 1977), 45-46.

² John Anderson to Ruth Walker, 1952, quoted in M. Weblin, *A Passion for Thinking* (unpublished), ch. 15.

³ J. Franklin, *Corrupting the Youth: A History of Philosophy in Australia* (Macleay Press, Sydney, 2003), 158.

which was inclined to emphasise the likely bad outcomes of change – for example, when the Cold War ended in 1989 he feared more than most that the former Soviet states would descend into chaos. He was strongly atheist but also fascinated by religion and by no means sure that the truth of atheism was a good thing: unlike what he took to be Enlightenment frivolity in cheerily thinking it is liberating to be free of priestcraft and superstition, he believed that in the worst times of life atheism left you without the important consolations of religion.⁴

In 1952 he applied for a position at the new University of New South Wales, which had made courses on philosophy of science compulsory for science students. He was placed second but due to an administrative error both candidates were sent letters offering them the position; the University decided that its expansion was sufficient to employ both.⁵ He moved back to Sydney University in 1960. In 1959 he married Jess, a biochemist who later worked in pathology, and they had two children, Robert and Judith (now both successful authors). He never got around to acquiring a Masters degree or PhD.



David Stove mowing, 1956



Reading Kneale's *Probability and Induction*; with Val Ackermann, Jess Leahy (later Stove), Norma Brigden, 1956

Photos courtesy of Judith Stove

He should have had a small success in 1960 with his book review 'Bertrand Russell, Andersonian'. It reviewed Bertrand Russell's new book, *The Wisdom of the West*, and expressed surprise at how large the content of Anderson's lectures on Plato loomed in the text. Stove wondered if the book might have been actually written by the person named as editor, the former Andersonian student Paul Foulkes. It was only revealed decades later that that was absolutely true – Foulkes had written the lot, including the preface thanking him for his own work, and Russell had put his name on it because he needed the money.⁶

Stove had a bad time in the early 1970s during Sydney University's "Philosophy troubles" when conservatives like himself were outnumbered by radicals in the fight over Marxist and feminist courses.⁷ Things improved when the department was split in two, and he and Armstrong joined the new Department of Traditional and Modern Philosophy and got on with serious philosophy, while the left-wing department spent their time watching their backs in departmental meetings.

⁴ J. Franklin, Review of D. Stove, *On Enlightenment*, *Sophia* 42 (2) (Oct 2003), 135-6, repr. in J. Franklin, *Catholic Values and Australian Realities* (Connor Court, 2006), 177-9.

⁵ Franklin, *Corrupting the Youth*, 282.

⁶ D. Stove, Bertrand Russell, Andersonian, *Nation* 6 Jan 1960, 22-23; *Corrupting the Youth*, 50-52.

⁷ Franklin, *Corrupting the Youth*, ch. 11.



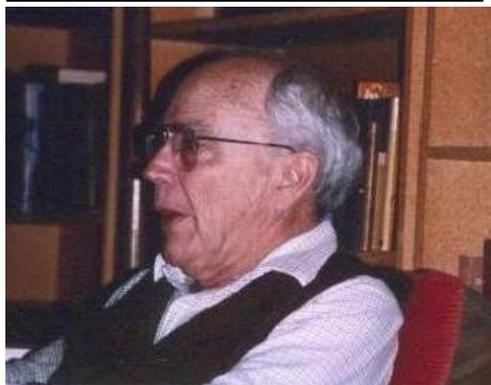
Madeleine Armstrong, Jess Stove, David Stove, Mulgoa 1979

In 1985 Sydney University threatened him with disciplinary action over his complaints about ‘Jobs for the Girls’,⁸ and he was glad to leave. He retired to his semi-rural property at Mulgoa and wrote.

An interesting essay of his at this time, ‘Living retired’ argues that it is almost impossible to enjoy retirement because you have incompatible desires. The essay starts:

Bing Crosby and Louis Armstrong, at a time when they were both millionaires many times over, recorded a song called “Gone Fishin’”. Its theme was as familiar as it was implausible: how they would much rather sit by “some shady, wady pool”, etc., than be enmeshed, as they were, in the feverish pursuit of money and fame. The record was a huge success, making the singers even richer and more famous than they had been before: which was, after all, their intention in making it. It will hardly need saying that neither singer ever did in fact renounce show business and “go fishin’” instead; or that this experiment, if it had been tried, would have been an ignominious failure. It has been tried often enough.⁹

C. 1980s



C. 1990



⁸ D.C. Stove, Jobs for the girls, *Quadrant* 29 (5) (May, 1985), 34-35.

⁹ <https://web.maths.unsw.edu.au/~jim/retired.html>

He gave up his heavy smoking for six months but found he could not write so resumed it. He was diagnosed with oesophageal cancer and the severe treatment for it contributed to worsening depression. He was confined to a psychogeriatric ward but escaped and committed suicide

Logical probability

Stove's work was all about arguments.

A central theme of Stove's work in philosophy was opposition to "deductivism" (the title of perhaps his first major paper, in 1970).¹⁰ That is not a very standard term. Deductivism is the thesis that the only logic is deductive logic, that is, logic that deals with argument forms that make the conclusion certain if the premises are. (For example, modus ponens, which says you can conclude with certainty from "if p then q" and "p" to "q"). Mathematical proof consists of deductive arguments. Arguments in science, however, need something else, arguments that do not make their conclusions certain; for example, the argument from "all observed ravens have been black" to "all ravens are black". Stove defended the theory of Keynes' *Treatise on Probability* that probabilistic arguments were fully logic, a kind of partial implication. Stove particularly emphasised the importance of the argument form called variously "proportional syllogism" or "statistical syllogism" or "direct inference". An example is

The vast majority of Qantas flights arrive safely

This is a Qantas flight

Therefore, this flight will very probably arrive safely

(Of course, if you have extra evidence about this flight, such as that you've seen the wheel fall off, that's an extra premise and the conclusion may be different; but that's true of any argument: an argument is about the relations of *given* premises to conclusion.) In general, a proportion in a set gives you good reason to believe something about a member of the set. Obviously this reasoning is found across science, for example, the statistical evidence in drug trials is the evidence for the efficacy of drugs.

Stove used these ideas to answer David Hume's inductive scepticism. Hume said that reasoning from the past to the future (or generally from sample to population), was rationally unjustified. Reasoning like "All observed ravens have been black, so the next observed raven will be black" is not deductive: no matter how many ravens have turned out black, the next one *could* be white or purple. So, Hume says, you must have assumed that nature is uniform or something like that, but if you ask how you know *that*, it's only from experience, so your reasoning is circular: to argue "nature has been uniform, so it will continue to be uniform" is another inductive argument, and you haven't justified that.

Stove points out what is wrong with that. If an argument is non-deductive, it doesn't have to be based on experience. It could be a matter of logic, which doesn't need experience to justify it.¹¹ Further, Stove offers to display exactly what logical inference it is that justifies inductive inference, namely, a proportional syllogism. Adapting an argument from D.C. Williams¹² that justifies any sample-to-population inference, he argues:

The great majority of large samples approximately match the population in composition (e.g. proportion of ravens that are black)

This is a large sample

Therefore, this sample approximately matches the population in composition, probably (i.e. the population probably resembles the sample)

¹⁰ D. Stove, *Deductivism*, Australasian Journal of Philosophy 48 (1970), 76-98.

¹¹ D.C. Stove, *Probability and Hume's Inductive Scepticism* (Clarendon, Oxford, 1973).

¹² D. Stove, *The Rationality of Induction* (Clarendon, Oxford, 1986); K. Campbell, J. Franklin and D. Ehring, Donald Cary Williams, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2019, section 6.

The first premise, about the majority of samples approximately matching the population, is a fact of pure mathematics. It is established by counting arguments, so there's no doubting that. Therefore, observing a sample gives good – logically good – reason for inferences beyond it.

Stove next turned his attention to an attack on the biggest names in the philosophy of science, Popper, Kuhn, Lakatos and Feyerabend. His 1982 book *Popper and After: Four Modern Irrationalists* attributes their views to a logical error – deductivism again. Popper had argued that scientific theories had to be “falsifiable”, that is, they had to “stick their necks out” and make predictions that could turn out to be false. “All ravens are black” does that, because if a white raven is found, the theory is falsified. So what happens if the theory is not falsified, and its predictions keep turning out to be true? Does that make the theory more probable than it was before? Popper says no, because he does not believe in the logic of probability. As Stove says, it is hard to proceed rationally in science if you think evidence does not count in favour of theories.

Stove calls attention to Popper's massive book called *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, which says in effect that there can't be a logic of scientific discovery. He compared that to Aesop's fable of the fox and the grapes, adding: “The parallel would be complete if the fox, having become convinced that neither he nor anyone else could ever succeed in tasting grapes, should nevertheless write many long books on the progress of viticulture.”

Controversies

In 1986 he “celebrated” his early retirement from Sydney University with an article ‘A farewell to Arts’. It began

The Faculty of Arts at the University of Sydney 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 ... This disaster in Arts has all happened in the last twenty years. In 1965 the Faculty as a whole was undistinguished, as it has always been. But it was not, then or earlier, what it is now, an important source of intellectual and moral devastation. Of course the disaster is not confined to Sydney University. Far from that, it is common to the Arts faculties of most Western universities. 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.¹³

He went on to name names and quote quotes. If he'd survived to see the humanities world of today and the recent controversy about the Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation, he would have said, “I told you so.”

As with Popper and deductivism, he believed that there was a single bad argument at the bottom of the flood of what we now call postmodernism.

In 1985, he ran a ‘Competition to Find the Worst Argument in the World’. In his marking scheme, half the marks went to the degree of badness of the argument, half to the degree of its endorsement by philosophers. Thus an argument was sought that was both very bad, and very prevalent.

He awarded the prize to himself, for the following argument:

We can know things only

- as they are related to us
 - under our forms of perception and understanding
 - insofar as they fall under our conceptual schemes,
- etc.

So,

¹³ D. Stove, A farewell to Arts: Marxism, semiotics and feminism, *Quadrant* May 1986, repr. in *Cricket Versus Republicanism*.

we cannot know things as they are in themselves.¹⁴

Perhaps you don't recall having seen an argument of that form. This version may be more familiar. Speaking of the typical products of a modern high school, Stove writes:

Their intellectual temper is (as everyone remarks) the reverse of dogmatic, in fact pleasingly modest. They are quick to acknowledge that their own opinion, on any matter whatsoever, is only their opinion; and they will candidly tell you, too, the reason why it *is* only their opinion. This reason is, that it is *their* opinion.¹⁵

That is a "worst argument" because it says "My opinion is just caused by something or other, so it's not something I know." Or surely you've heard something like this, as Stove describes it:

The cultural-relativist, for example, inveighs bitterly against our science-based, white-male cultural perspective. She says that it is not only injurious but cognitively limiting. Injurious it may be; or again it may not. But why does she believe that it is cognitively limiting? Why, for no other reason in the world, except this one: that it is ours. Everyone really understands, too, that this is the only reason. But since this reason is also generally accepted as a sufficient one, no other is felt to be needed.¹⁶

That is a form of "Worst argument" because all there is to it is "We see things only through our science-based, white-male cultural perspective, therefore we don't see things as they are." As Alan Olding put it, it's like arguing "We have eyes, therefore we can't see."¹⁷

His 1991 book, *The Plato Cult and Other Philosophical Follies*, attacks many of the most celebrated philosophers, especially the idealists, for saying things that are either obviously false or unintelligible. A high point is the chapter 'What is wrong with our thoughts', which claims that we don't understand most of the ways our thoughts can go wrong, other than simple factual mistakes and contradictions. He lists forty ways you could go wrong talking about the number 3 (chosen just as a random illustration, as a test-bed for the ways philosophers speak generally):

1. Between 1960 and 1970 there were three US presidents named Johnson. [A simple factual mistake: we understand that]
2. Between 1960 and 1970 there were three US presidents named Johnson, and it is not the case that between 1960 and 1970 there were three US presidents named Johnson. [A simple contradiction: we understand that]
7. Three lies between two and four only by a convention which mathematicians have adopted.
8. There *is* an integer between two and four, but it is not three, and its true name and nature are not to be revealed.
25. Five is of the same substance as three, co-eternal with three, very three of three: it is only in their *attributes* that three and five are different.
38. The unconscious significance of the number three is invariably phallic, nasal, and patriarchal.¹⁸

Next he defended conservatism as a matter of principle. Again he claimed there was a single bad argument driving the other side. People should fear the unintended consequences of change, he said, and they would if they hadn't fallen for "the Columbus argument". That argument is, "They all laughed at Christopher Columbus, when he said the world was round", "They said Galileo was mad", etc. Those

¹⁴ D.C. Stove, Judge's report on the competition to find the worst argument in the world, in D.C. Stove, *Cricket Versus Republicanism* (Sydney: Quakers Hill Press, 1995), 66-7; J. Franklin, Stove's discovery of the worst argument in the world, *Philosophy* 77 (2002), 615-24.

¹⁵ D.C. Stove, *The Plato Cult and Other Philosophical Follies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 168.

¹⁶ Stove, *Plato Cult*, 167.

¹⁷ A. Olding, Religion as smorgasbord, *Quadrant*, 42 (5) (May, 1998), 73-5.

¹⁸ D. Stove, *The Plato Cult and Other Philosophical Follies* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1991), ch. 7, repr at <https://web.maths.unsw.edu.au/~jim/wrongthoughts.html>

examples are intended to suggest you should hare off after new ideas and not be a stick-in-the-mud conservative. But, Stove points out, that is a “one-sided diet of examples”. The great majority of people they said were mad, were mad. (A proportional syllogism again.) The default position should be conservative.¹⁹

Feminism and evolution

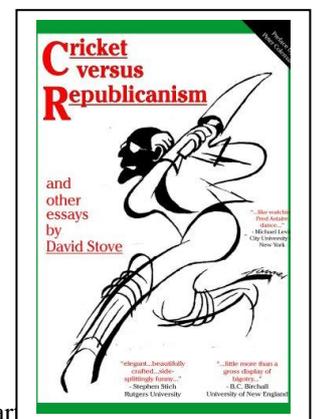
Next, and most controversially, he gave a view on the intelligence of women. In a talk on ‘The intellectual capacity of women’, published obscurely in 1990, he again concentrated on a single argument which he thought was being ignored. He was not interested in, for example, IQ tests, which he placed no faith in. He argues that at all higher levels of intelligence there are more men than women, and his grounds are that achievement at higher intellectual levels has been observed to be majority male, across a vast range of different circumstances.²⁰ The argument is the simple one that you infer natural ability from performance (across a range of circumstances). It’s the same argument as in the reply to Rousseau’s dictum “Man is born free but everywhere he is in chains” made by the conservative theorist Joseph de Maistre: “You might as well say that sheep are born carnivorous but everywhere they eat grass.” Outcomes are the indicator of natures, unless you have a very good excuse.

Those who think women are as intelligent as men, on average, will reply that there *are* excuses – that across a wide range of societies and times, there have been factors preventing women realising their intellectual potential. That is a reasonable argument. But it is premised on there being a need for such an excuse, that is, on Stove’s argument having some force. So it is surprising, or at least unsatisfactory, that the argument itself is missing from the debate. Google scholar records a total of a mere seven citations of Stove’s article, none of which, I think, agree with him. So Stove’s work has not made much contribution to the survival of the patriarchy. (By comparison, *Popper and After* and its reprints have a very respectable 334 citations.)

Finally – in case there were anyone not offended by any of his views so far – in his last years he wrote a book, *Darwinian Fairytales*,²¹ attacking the theory of evolution. Again his approach concerns an aspect of the logic of the argument for Darwinism, but it is not entirely easy to explain what that is. He said he had no objection to the standard theory of evolution being true of pines and cod, but he thought the theory as presented, especially with the addition of sociobiology, had made logical mistakes and as a result given a false picture of humanity. The kind of thing he objected to are “fairytales”, as his title puts it, easy alleged explanations of anything. I heard David Armstrong once put this forward seriously: why do women live longer than men? Because old women are useful for looking after the infants around the campfire, so contribute to the tribe’s survival, but old men aren’t any use and are just a drain on resources; therefore extra longevity for women was selected for by evolution. Philosophers love the theory of evolution because they can dream up that sort of thing indefinitely and it “explains” everything in principle without the need to do any real scientific hard work. The theory never properly confronts evidence because it can explain anything away.²²

Posthumous fame

After his death Stove found an unexpected level of attention in conservative circles. Thanks to the efforts of his literary executor, myself, and some admirers – Keith Windschuttle in Sydney, Andrew Irvine in Canada, and Roger Kimball in New York – eight books of his work were published: *Darwinian Fairytales* itself and a reprint with introduction, two books of collected essays, *Cricket Versus Republicanism* and *Against the Idols of the Age*, and two books against the Enlightenment idea of



¹⁹ D. Stove, The Columbus argument, *Commentary*, Dec 1987, <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/archives/columbus-argument/>

²⁰ D. Stove, The intellectual capacity of women, *Proceedings of the Russellian Society*, 1990, available at <https://wmbriggs.com/post/17124/>

²¹ D. Stove, *Darwinian Fairytales* (Avebury, Aldershot, 1995), repr, with introduction by Roger Kimball (Encounter Books, New York, 2007).

²² J. Franklin, Stove’s anti-Darwinism, *Philosophy* 72 (1997), 133-6.

inevitable progress, *On Enlightenment* and *What's Wrong with Benevolence*, and two reprints of *Popper and After* with introductions, *Anything Goes* and *Scientific Irrationalism: Origins of a Postmodern Cult*. None became exactly bestsellers, but between them they gained a considerable readership.

Jim Franklin

David Stove website: <https://web.maths.unsw.edu.au/~jim/davidstove.html>

Australian Dictionary of Biography entry: <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/stove-david-charles-1547>

David Stove, Why have philosophers? *Quadrant* 29 (7), (July 1985), 82-83,
<https://web.maths.unsw.edu.au/~jim/whyhave.html>

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