



What's Wrong with Benevolence: Happiness, Private Property, and the Limits of Enlightenment

David Stove

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Is benevolence a virtue? In many cases it appears to be so. But when it comes to the “enlarged benevolence” of the Enlightenment, David Stove argues that the answer is clearly no. In this insightful, provocative essay, Stove builds a case for the claim that when benevolence is universal, disinterested and external, it regularly leads to the forced redistribution of wealth, which in turn leads to decreased economic incentives, lower rates of productivity, and increased poverty.

As Stove points out, there is an air of paradox in saying that benevolence may be a cause of poverty. But there shouldn't be. Good intentions alone are never sufficient to guarantee the success of one's endeavors. Utopian schemes to reorganize the world have regularly ended in failure.

Easily the most important example of this phenomenon is twentieth-century communism. As Stove reminds us, the attractiveness of communism—the “emotional fuel” of communist revolutionaries for over a hundred years—has always been “exactly the same as the emotional fuel of every other utopianism: the passionate desire to alleviate or abolish misery.” Yet communism was such a monumental failure that millions of people today are still suffering its consequences.

In this most prescient of essays, Stove warns contemporary readers just how seductive universal political benevolence can be. He also shows how the failure to understand the connection between benevolence and communism has led to many of the greatest social miseries of our age.



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