The New Criterion

Features November 2003

Friends of humanity?

by *Roger Kimball*

William Godwin, Condorcet, and Malthus: Or, Why benevolence is bad for you.

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.
—J. M. Keynes, on Bertrand Russell

Oh, tell me, who first declared, who first proclaimed that man only does nasty things because he does not know his own real interests; and that if he were enlightened, if his eyes were opened to his real normal interests, man would at once cease to do nasty things, would at once become good and noble because, being enlightened and understanding his real advantage, he would see his own advantage in the good and nothing else. . . . Oh, the babe! Oh, the pure, innocent child!
—F. Dostoyevsky, *Notes from the Underground*

In February of 1793, a lapsed Presbyterian minister named William Godwin published his Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, an answer—so he believed—to the hitherto intractable problem of human happiness. Overnight, this plump compendium of Enlightened opinion transformed Godwin, then in his late thirties, from an obscure scribbler of atheistic leanings into an in ternational celebrity. Wherever advanced thinking flourished, there were Godwin and his wife, the feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft, celebrated. "I was nowhere a stranger," he boasted to his diary, "I was received everywhere with curiosity and kindness"—not to mention (he might have added) worshipful adulation. The following year, his didactic novel Caleb Williams, or Things as They Are—a fictionalized dramatization of the egalitarian ideas that fueled the Enquiry—seemingly cemented the fame. Godwin's many acolytes gleefully identified themselves as "Godwinites"; they began referring to "The Grand Master," "The Philosopher," an appellation formerly reserved for Aristotle. "No work in our time," Hazlitt wrote in 1815, looking back on the comet of Godwin's fame, "gave such a blow to the philosophical mind of the country [as did the Enquiry]. . . . Truth, moral truth, it was supposed, had here taken up its abode." Intellectuals and literary types were particularly susceptible. Robert Southey and Wordsworth enthused wildly over Godwin, as did Coleridge, who dedicated an "ardent lay" to the man who "Bade the bright form of

Justice meet my way—/ And told me that her name was HAPPINESS."
Of course, sudden intoxications have a way of turning crapulous without warning. Such was the fate awaiting the reputation of Godwin and his gospel. Published when the public's infatuation with the French revolutionary "experiment" was at high tide, Godwin's *Enquiry* formed a perfect obligato to the incessant clamorings for liberty, equality, fraternity. It was just at that dawn when (said Wordsworth) it was "bliss . . . to be alive." Yes, well: tell it to Robespierre. Within a couple of years the Terror had translated the famous slogan into tyranny, usurpation, and panic. Then there was the war between England and France. Godwin's flame guttered as suddenly as it had ignited. Hazlitt, himself a one-time worshipper, mournfully registered the metanoia: "no one was more talked of, more looked up to, more sought after. . . . Now he has sunk below the horizon, and enjoys the serene twilight of a doubtful immortality."

Like many, Hazlitt was more disappointed than disabused. Whatever eclipse Godwin suffered in the court of public opinion, his fame, Hazlitt thought, "can never die." If his eminence seemed "posthumous," it was with the venerable majesty that marks eternal intellectual monuments. In 1812, the nineteen-year-old Shelley, freshly rusticated from Oxford, showed that the Enquiry still had the power to ensorcell. He thrilled to Godwin's paeans on behalf of radical equality, the abolition of private property, the tyranny of marriage as only an aristocratic heir to an estate worth £6000 per annum (more than £200,000 today) could do.

For his part, Godwin was only too happy to avail himself of loans and gifts from his new disciple. Matters cooled markedly when Shelley ran off with Godwin's sixteen year-old daughter Mary (the future author of *Frankenstein*) without first disencumbering himself of his wife, Harriet. Godwin refused to see them (though he graciously continued to accept Shelley's largess). Fortunately, Harriet soon obliged everyone by committing suicide. Before long Shelley had set up house for all involved, and Godwin was proudly writing friends that Mary was about to marry "the heir to a baronetcy."

The Shelley circus to one side, Hazlitt was right about the fate of Godwin's ideas. They suffered a temporary setback because of the Terror and the war with France: the rude intrusion of violence will do that to Enlightened moral ideas. But this was a matter of hibernation, not extinction. In many respects—in their overall drift if not in detail or rhetorical temperature—Godwin's ideas, with or without Godwin's name attached, continue to fire the imagination of . . . let's call them "idealists" or "Friends of Humanity" down to this day.

Although it is a work of nearly 800 pages in its modern editions, Godwin's *Enquiry* is nevertheless an impatient work—impatient, that is, about the human condition. Hazlitt said that Godwin's fault was "too much ambition. . . . He conceived too nobly of his fellows." That is one way of putting it. But the question remains whether such overestimation is a form of laudable generosity or culpable blindness.

Every philosophy has its master words and concepts. Chief among Godwin's is "benevolence." What his philosophy teaches, Godwin says, is a "system of disinterested benevolence." Hitherto "the whole structure of human society" has been "a system of the narrowest selfishness." That spirit of selfishness results above all from the institution of private property. Inherently, human beings are "formed to glow with benevolence." But laws, governments, institutions—all the apparatuses designed to protect and perpetuate private property and, hence, inequality—have dimmed the glow. Since "The Characters of Men Originate in Their External Circumstances" (as Godwin denominates one of his early sections), all we need to do is reform the "external circumstances" of society and, *presto* (or possibly *allegro non troppo*), men's characters will also improve. Here is the crux: Abolish private property, and mankind, finally awakened to its true interests, will cease to plot and hoard and accumulate.

I know: it sounds extravagant. But I have provided the merest bald summary. Let Godwin put some flesh on the bones:

> The spirit of oppression, the spirit of servility, and the spirit of fraud, these are the immediate growth of the established administration of property. They are alike hostile to intellectual improvement. The other vices of envy, malice, and revenge are their inseparable companions. In a state of society where men lived in the midst of plenty, and where all shared alike the bounty of nature, these sentiments would inevitably expire. The narrow principle of selfishness would vanish. No man obliged to guard his little store, or provide with anxiety and pain for his restless wants, each would lose his individual existence in the thought of the general good. No man would be an enemy to his neighbours, for they would have no subject of contention; and of consequence philanthropy would resume the empire which reason assigns her. Mind would be delivered from her perpetual anxiety about corporal support; and be free to expatiate in the field of thought which is congenial to her.

In other words, the *Enquiry* is, *par excellence*, an Enlightenment product: contemptuous of the past and its institutions, boundless in its optimism and faith in the transformative power of reason.

Godwin's attack on selfishness went deep. The institution of marriage, he points out, is only an extension of the institution of private property. It, too, is an unjust "monopoly." When it comes to relations between the sexes, Godwin says, reason tells us that "no ties ought to be imposed upon either party, preventing them from quitting the attachment, whenever their judgement directs them to quit it." (Unless, of course, his daughter Mary be involved.) Godwin pondered the matter and concluded that "The abolition of the present system of marriage appears to involve no evils." Any children, he thinks, will be cared for by the benevolence of individuals or society as a whole. And the issue of sexual passion and jealousy barely makes it onto his radar.

> But "it may happen that other men will feel for her the same preference that I do." This will create no difficulty. We may all enjoy her conversation; her choice being declared, we shall all be wise enough to consider the sexual commerce as unessential to our regard. It is a mark of the extreme depravity of our present habits, that we are inclined to suppose the sexual commerce necessary to the advantages arising from the purest friendship.

It was next to this paragraph, it pains me to report, that a previous reader of a library copy of the *Enquiry* inscribed the indelicate objection "horseshit."

We all frown on the defacement of library books. But the impulse in this instance is perhaps understandable. In any event, Godwin does not confine his speculations to mundane matters like property and marriage. In an (admittedly conjectural) appendix on "Health and the Prolongation of Human Life," he dilates on his belief in the "omnipotence of mind." It works like this: Cheerfulness, he argues, is a habit "peculiarly favorable to corporeal vigor"; "the surest source of cheerfulness is benevolence"; and since his philosophy taught benevolence for breakfast, as it were, one may look forward not simply to better health among Godwinites but to "a total extirpation of the infirmities of our nature." It is one version of mind over matter.

One might worry that greater longevity would lead to overpopulation. Not so. Men in the future "will probably cease to propagate," Godwin reasons, partly because people will live so long that the population won't need topping up often, partly because "One tendency of a cultivated and virtuous mind is to diminish our eagerness for the gratification of the senses."

True political justice is not just a matter of individual gratification, of course. As individual characters become increasingly benevolent, so will the character of society as a whole. Godwin admits that he is going a bit out on a limb here, but he speculates that there are many "other improvements" that "may be expected" when society finally catches up with his philosophy.

> There will be no war, no crimes, no administration of justice, as it is called, and no government. Beside this, there will be neither disease, anguish, melancholy, nor resentment. Every man will seek, with ineffable ardour, the good of all. . . . Men will see the progressive advancement of virtue and good, and feel that, if things occasionally happen contrary to their hopes, the miscarriage was a necessary part of that progress.

I hope you will agree that the historian Gertrude Himmelfarb exercised remarkable understatement when she described Godwin's political vision as "the utopia to end all utopias."

Which is not, of course, to suggest that there were not other, equally fervent, Friends of Humanity competing with Godwin for that trophy. Consider, for example, Marie-Jean-Antoine-Nicolas Caritat, the Marquis de Condorcet (1743–1794). Condorcet, the philosopher Stuart Hampshire eulogized, was "a man of gentle and ardent disposition . . . with a passionate hatred of injustice . . . the type of the philosopher-reformer of his time." Indeed. Condorcet was a mathematician of some note, one of the "Encyclopedists" who gathered around Voltaire, a true son of the Enlightenment. He espoused (with some provisos) the cause of egalitarianism, abominated religion, and hoped to see the end of the French monarchy. While serving as a member of a sub-committee of the Committee of Public Safety, Condorcet voted against the proposed Jacobin constitution. He also voted against executing the king. These were tactical errors. Condorcet was a firm Friend of Humanity. But, as the philosopher David Stove observed, his opponents, who were "even firmer Friends of Humanity, outlawed him and hunted him down, and he died in prison in 1794." During the six months he was in hiding, Condorcet dashed off his most famous work, the

Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind. It was posthumously published, at government expense, in Year III, i.e., 1795.

It is not surprising that the Revolutionary government approved of Condorcet's work. The man himself might have been unsound, but his ideas—well, they speak for themselves. Most of the *Sketch* deals with the benighted past: "The Eighth Stage: From the invention of printing to the time when philosophy and the sciences shook off the yoke of authority"—that sort of thing. Condorcet does not really come into his own until he gets to the tenth and last "stage," which deals with "the future progress of the human mind."

Like Godwin, Condorcet foresaw all manner of glorious things awaiting humanity now that the "priests and despots" were on their way out. Enlightenment had dawned, was dawning, and inequality, both among nations and, to a large extent, among individuals, would soon be a thing of the past. "Already in Great Britain," Condorcet noted, "friends of humanity have set us an example" in their trade policies. He envisioned a number of things—state-funded pension programs, for example—which have duly materialized.

But free trade, pension schemes, and such were only the tip of the Enlightened Iceberg. Condorcet cherished "a hope that is almost a certainty" that the eradication of inequality would bring about "the absolute perfection of the human race" ("*perfectionnement même de l'espèce humaine*"). The triumph of Enlightenment principles, he said, will lead "almost every man" to cultivate the "habits of an active and enlightened benevolence." Like Godwin, again, Condorcet was an "externalist": he thought that the source of mankind's imperfections lay not in human nature but in the outward circumstances of society. Tidy up society and you can say goodbye to irritating things like selfishness. "What are we to expect," he asked,

> from the perfection of laws and public institutions . . . but the reconciliation, the identification of the interests of each with the interests of all? . . . Is there any vicious habit, any practice contrary to good faith, whose origin and first cause cannot be traced back to the legislation, the institutions, and prejudices of the country wherein this habit, this practice, this crime can be observed?

Sounds pretty up-to-date, doesn't it?

Since bad things are the fault of society, education is the solution to just about every evil. Education will lead to "the complete annihilation" of the age-old prejudices that nurtured the inequality of the sexes. Wars will disappear. National animosities will disappear "one by one." Advances in education will also result in a sort of scientific esperanto which will make "knowledge of the truth easy and error almost impossible," thus promoting even further the cause of equality. "We may conclude"—which is to say, Condorcet does conclude—"that the perfectibility of man is limitless" (*indéfinie*). Not content with longer life, better health, an end to infectious diseases, Condorcet ends with a Godwinian glimpse of the day when the philosopher will dwell in "an Elysium created by reason" and "death will be due only to extraordinary accidents or to the decay of the vital forces, and that ultimately the average span between birth and decay will have no

assignable value."

There are many many possible responses to the Godwin-Condorcet version of human destiny. The Victorian critic Leslie Stephen touched on a few when, in an essay on Godwin's novels, he cited his subject's "frigid dogmatism" and "singular incapacity for even suspecting the humorous or fanciful aspects of life." He even allowed himself the phrase "superlative bore." But perhaps the most devastating response came from a studious, Cambridge-educated curate and professor named Thomas Robert Malthus. Malthus was well acquainted with the rosy, Enlightened view of human nature so vividly espoused by Godwin and Condorcet, among many others. Malthus's father had harbored similar views. Indeed, in 1766 he even endeavored to engage Rousseau, then visiting England, as the future tutor for his new-born son. A gracious providence intervened, but one wonders what Malthus and the paterfamilias of whole wheat, "man-was-born-free" optimism would have made of each other.

Godwin and Condorcet saw splendid vistas opening up for humanity once it had dispensed with the albatross of religion, conventional morality, and private property. Malthus detected a few flies in the ointment. These he enumerated in *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, the first edition of which was published in 1798.

On Population became one of the most influential books of the nineteenth century. It had two additional distinctions. It was among the most reviled books of its era. It was—and is—also among the most widely misunderstood.

Malthus wrote *On Population* as an anti-utopian attack on Enlightenment optimism and the "systems of equality" (i.e., what we would call "socialism" or "communism") which that optimism promulgated. The subtitle of the first edition clarifies Malthus's intentions: Population "as it affects the future improvement of Society, with remarks on the speculation of Mr. Godwin, Mr. Condorcet, and other writers."

There are many ironies attached to the history and reception of *On Population*. One has to do with a persistent popular misunderstanding. Everyone learns about gloomy "Malthusian" prognostications in school. These involve warnings about the alleged difference between the rate at which the food supply and the population grow. Malthus is presented as the Jeremiah of overpopulation, even a covert advocate of contraception, warning that, unless humanity acts fast, it will over-breed and run out of food.

In fact, Malthus issued no such warnings. And he was certainly no advocate of birth control (a species of "vice" that he congregated under the heading of "improper arts"). What Malthus calls the "principle of population" was (in David Stove's phrase) a "steady-state" theory. It holds that, for any body of organisms, the population is always at or near the limit of the food supply. At nature's table, Malthus says, all the places are always filled. Hence, to the extent that the equality heralded by Godwin, Condorcet, *et al.*, was achieved, "distress for want of food would be

constantly pressing on all mankind." The relative impoverishment of some would be replaced by the absolute impoverishment of all.

Malthus wrote *On Population* as a political tract. But a large part of its fame is due to its place in the history of biology. For it was the principle of population that gave Darwin and A. R. Wallace the mechanism that propelled the process of natural selection. *That* evolution occurred they knew from the fossil record and comparative anatomy. But by what means did it operate? This is where the principle of population came in. In his autobiography, Darwin recalls reading Malthus in 1838. "It at once struck me that under these circumstances favorable variations would tend to be preserved, and unfavorable ones to be destroyed. The result of this would be the formation of new species. Here, then, I had at last got a theory by which to work."

The principle of population was an essential part of what is perhaps the most successful biological theory ever formulated. It is a further irony, then, that the principle is not true, at least as regards human beings. It deserved, and received, criticism from many quarters. For one thing, Malthus contrasts the rate at which population increases with the rate at which food increases; but his theory ignores the fact that food *consists of* organic populations, i.e., stuff that according to his principle is supposed to increase "arithmetically." In later editions of his book, Malthus so modified what he said about the principle of population that he abandoned it in fact if not in words.

What he did not abandon was his hostility to the utopian theories formulated by Godwin, Condorcet, and other champions of Enlightenment. At the center of those theories is the cheery conviction that mankind is essentially rational, benevolent, and self-sacrificing. In the abstract, it is a gratifying picture; the problem is reality: human beings are not like that. As Malthus observes, "The substitution of benevolence, as the master-spring and moving principle of society, instead of self-love, appears at first sight to be a consummation devoutly to be wished. . . . But alas! That moment can never arrive." On the contrary, the exaltation of benevolence is a prescription for misery, for in suppressing self-interest one also suppresses the force through which mankind has achieved whatever moral and intellectual triumphs it can claim. Private property is indeed an impediment to universal benevolence; but universal benevolence is no more than a phantom. As Malthus observes, "To the laws of property and marriage, and to the apparently narrow principle of self-interest which prompts each individual to exert himself in bettering his condition, we are indebted for all the noblest exertions of human genius, for everything that distinguishes the civilised from the savage state."

Like most such schemes, the Godwin-Condorcet brand of utopia is essentially *dis*establishing of the past and its legal, economic, and religious institutions. But it is one of the bitterest lessons of history that, although human institutions are often the cause of "much mischief to society," they are, Malthus noted, "light and superficial in comparison with those deeper-seated causes of evil which result from the laws of nature and the passions of mankind." Abolish private property and the result would be not the extinction but the enhancement of selfishness: "Were there no

established administration of property, every man would be obliged to guard with force his little store. Selfishness would be triumphant. The subjects of contention would be perpetual."

The moral? In part, that Friends of Humanity are no friends of humanity. It is easy to smile at the musings of a Godwin or a Condorcet. But it is worth recalling how many progeny they have spawned—not only Marx, Lenin, Stalin, and other such thoroughgoing Friends of Humanity, but also myriad contemporary well-wishers who, though less rigorous, nevertheless combine the emotion of benevolence with imperative moralism. It is a combination that promises paradise but in fact, as David Stove put it, "is infallibly and enormously destructive of human happiness." Reflecting on the sudden eclipse of Godwin's reputation, Hazlitt asked: "Were we fools then, or are we dishonest now?" The answer, alas, is Yes.

Roger Kimball is Editor and Publisher of *The New Criterion* and President and Publisher of Encounter Books. His latest books include *The Critical Temper: Interventions from* The New Criterion *at 40* (Encounter Books) and *Where Next? Western Civilization at the Crossroads* (Encounter Books).

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 22 Number 3 , on page 17

https://newcriterion.com/issues/2003/11/friends-of-humanity