

The Intellectual Capacity of David Stove

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The Australian philosopher David Stove (1927–1994) has little fame outside his native land. Perhaps though his name will become better known as the result of the posthumous publication of his manuscript on Darwinism and three recent re-printings of some of his essays.

Stove himself remarked that his intellectual capacities were mainly of the destructive variety and I think that is true. His criticisms were usually very sharp and sometimes very funny. Targets included Plato, Darwin, John Stuart Mill, Karl Popper and the thinkers of the Enlightenment; also Marxism, semiotics, feminism and egalitarian ideas about race. In his writings he was given to exaggeration and a somewhat aggressive tone of voice but those traits were often ameliorated by a light-hearted jokiness which most readers, I believe, find quite delightful. In the present context, though, it is worth noticing that while Platonism made him laugh feminism made him angry.

Stove's paper 'The intellectual capacity of women' has now been printed three times from which it is reasonable to infer that it is well-liked by his admirers. However as far as I know it has never been submitted to any kind of criticism, philosophical or other—in spite of its contentiously anti-egalitarian thesis.

'The intellectual capacity of women' was first read to a meeting of a Sydney philosophical society, the Russellian Society, in 1990 and then printed and distributed to members of the society as part of its *Proceedings*. I understand that Stove did not at first want it to be published in any other form. It is possible that he changed his mind later but be that as it may the essay was not in fact re-issued until after his death. It first re-appeared in a collection called *Cricket versus Republicanism* edited by R. J. Stove and James Franklin. My quotations and page references are taken from the version in that book.

Recently I suggested to one of Stove's friends that his reluctance to re-publish might have been the result of a perception, that the paper was perhaps no good. Although unable to say why exactly Stove wanted to withhold the essay from publication his friend felt

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sure that it can't have been for the reason I'd suggested. Nevertheless I still think it is a likely explanation. It would be surprising if a man as astute as David Stove failed to notice flaws in a work of philosophy.

The most interesting faults of the paper are characteristically philosophical, the result of sticking to theories come what may. They include some wrong ideas about evidence, an inept definition (of capacity) and the choice of an inappropriate model of probability. Other defects stem from Stove's tendency to exaggerate, a tendency which caused him to contradict himself and led, also, to mistakes about factual matters. Lesser flaws include bluffing ('No-one will dispute ...') and big-headed claims to total rationality.

I will discuss his more important mistakes one by one.

Stove's thesis

The evidence for the inferior intellectual capacity of women is so obvious and overwhelming that anyone who can lightly set it aside must be defective in their *attitude* to evidence ... equality-theorists are in fact religious rather than rational in their attitude to evidence (page 48).

The evidence, said Stove, is this: achievement is both a good indicator and the only available indicator of ability. Similarly, lack of achievement is both a good indicator and the only available indicator of absence of ability, other things being equal. Over many centuries, and in every country, and under a huge variety of circumstances the intellectual achievements of women have been greatly outnumbered and outclassed by those of men. The variety of circumstances under which women have lived has never led to any variety in their intellectual performance which has remained invariant and uniform throughout history. Removing obstacles never makes much difference. Moreover the so-called obstacles faced by women have been 'trifling' [his word] when compared to those faced by Christians [his example]. Obstacles, therefore, cannot explain the unvarying statistical gap made between male and female intellectual achievements.

Logic:

Stove treats the supposed connection between lack of achievement and lack of capacity as on a par with the connection between achievement and capacity. But that is a mistake.

There is a medieval rule of inference (found also in Aristotle) which runs as follows: *ab esse ad posse valet consequentia*: that is, the

argument from *is* to *can* is valid. It is self-evidently true that if something exists or occurs then it can exist or occur. On the other hand impossibility cannot be inferred from non-existence. If something does not exist or occur it doesn't follow that it could not exist or occur.

Inferences based on the above medieval rule have to be restricted as to time and place if they concern temporal things. Athletes who achieve a four-minute mile don't retain the possibility of repeating the performance into old age.

Bearing these points in mind let's look at a formula for a valid demonstrative argument. I'll call this formula M:

M: If during time *t* a human group *G* achieves many things then during time *t* those achievements were possible for *G*, i.e., *G* had certain capacities at that time.

Now consider a seemingly similar kind of argument which I'll call F:

F: If during time *t* a human group *G* achieves very little then during *t* very few achievements were possible for *G*, i.e., *G* had very few capacities at that time.

Comments:

i. Any attempt to deduce F propositions from M propositions would perpetrate the fallacy of negating the antecedent, one of two forms jokingly known as *modus morons*, The Way of the Moron.

ii. M propositions are necessary truths, F propositions are not necessary truths.

iii. Stove must have known that propositions of the form F cannot be inferred from those of form M but since he repeatedly places examples of these two forms on a par with each other he might well have accidentally persuaded some of his readers to suppose that F can indeed be deduced from M.

iv. Stove also knew, of course, that neither M propositions nor F propositions prove anything about the future.

Evidence:

Stove insisted that he had no logical proof that women are intellectually inferior to men. His argument, he said, was non-demonstrative, a matter of empirical evidence. He believed that past non-achievement is good evidence that there won't be achievement in the future and is therefore good evidence of innate lack of capacity.

What if non-achievement is caused by obstruction? Stove's answer was as follows: when failure to achieve persists for a very

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long time and under the widest possible variety of circumstances then there is no reason to suppose that obstruction explains the failure.

You can't go on forever saying 'the game's not fair' when the game has been played ten billion times under a billion different circumstances (page 37).

Presented with the proposition that female absence of achievement has lasted for thousands of years Stovians bow down in awe while anti-Stovians fall back in disarray. For it now looks as if female inferiority must be innate. However if it were innate the future is going to be like the past, and here we have to ask: is non-occurrence in the past invariably good evidence for non-occurrence in the future?

No, it is not. It could only *always* be good evidence in a static universe (and note, here, that in a static universe achievement as such would be impossible). For millions of years no-one ever spoke on a telephone: was that good evidence for the eternal non-existence of telephones? For thousands of years men ate their food raw: was that good evidence for the perpetual non-occurrence of roast potatoes and caramel custard?

Well then, is Stovian evidence, though not *invariably* good evidence, nevertheless good evidence *sometimes*, good evidence, that is, in matters specially pertaining to the human race?

No, it is not. The life patterns of human beings change more often and more radically than those of any other species. Human societies are among the least static things on earth. Moreover radical departures from past patterns affect the female of the species as well as the males. In this century women, especially western women, have done things that their distant and not so distant foremothers had never done; e.g. climbing Everest, playing soccer, performing surgery, voting in elections, becoming Vice-Chancellors in ancient universities, writing academic books, acting as priests in a monotheistic religion—and so on and so on. It seems strange to me that although most of the changes just mentioned took place during Stove's own lifetime he never discusses them and makes no attempt to explain them.

Is an explanation required? Yes it is, because Stove claimed that the effects of educating women are 'singularly invariant' (page 36); he thus raised some questions about female goings-on in the twentieth century. He also said that the intellectual inferiority of women in comparison with men is 'uniform' (page 38) and thus raised the question: Have the men maintained their lead over the women, or not?

Frequency, probability and capacity:

Stove's conception of evidence relies on his definition of capacity and his model of probability.

A past event is an actual event the occurrence of which entails its own possibility. As such it is neither likely nor unlikely. Future events however can be likely or unlikely and when Stove rightly insisted that he was offering, not a logical proof of his thesis, but simply a lot of empirical evidence, he wanted to commit himself to the future as well as to the past.

His principle of inference is as follows: The probability of (future) events or states of affairs occurring can be calculated by ascertaining the frequency of similar events in the past. To this principle he added a definition:

Nobody disputes ... that from this uniform inequality in the frequencies of intellectual performance between the two sexes, it will be rational to infer a similar inequality in their *probabilities of intellectual performances, that is their intellectual capacities* ... [my italics] (page 34).

Unlike Stove I do not believe that it is always rational to rely on a list of past frequencies when trying to predict the future. For just suppose that past frequency is indeed all we have to go on. What follows? Nothing follows. Suppose that sea water is all the water we have to drink. Does that mean it would be rational to drink it? Of course not. 'It's all we've got' doesn't entail 'so we ought to use it'.

Arguing from observed frequencies in the past to future probabilities is not unreasonable when predicting the movements of planets and it is fine for predicting the number of times a coin will come down heads in 10,000 throws. The outcomes of coin-tossing, when considered simply as such, and not as causes, are not proper subjects for chaos theory. Much of human life, on the other hand, is a fitting subject for chaos theory because most events in personal and social life are steered by multitudes of seemingly trivial and often imponderable causal factors. Stove conceded that human life is far more complicated than coin-tossing but he then ignored his own concession:

[when] inferring the comparative intellectual capacities of men and women from their comparative intellectual performances in that large and variable 'sample' which is human history ... we are thrown back, *just as in the coin case* on having to infer probabilities from observed frequencies [my italics] (page 34).

Long before anyone thought of chaos theory it was well known that arguing from past frequencies to future probabilities simply does

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not work in the case of human history. Human history is a huge jumble and that immediately raises a huge problem, namely: how are we to decide which of a billion billion possible frequencies to look for and look at? Which frequencies should we ignore, and why?

A large percentage of the social predictions made by our forbears have turned out to be wrong. They turn out to be wrong when based on inspired prophecy and wrong when resulting from a study of history and wrong when stemming from seemingly rational extrapolations from past to future. Politicians and their advisors get things seriously wrong, for instance, they never foresee the unwanted side effects of new laws. Novelists like George Orwell get things wrong. The predictions of Hegel and Marx turned out to be wrong. Surprising things happen all the time. As J. J. C. Smart says, the only thing we know for sure about the future is that it won't be much like what we thought it would be like.

But let us return to Stove. Let's ask: Why is it, exactly, that past frequencies do not provide reliable information about the human future? Why won't Stove's account of probability work in the case of his 'sample', the case of human history?

The reason isn't very difficult to see. It is this:

The concept of probability that Stove was working with consisted of simple extrapolation from past to future.

Simple extrapolation cannot predict change.

The universe is not static and the behaviour of the human race is even less static than the behaviour of most other things in the universe.

So statements of probability which rest on simple extrapolation from the human past to the human future are pretty sure to go wrong.

Generalities, exaggerations and contradictions:

Stove's premises contain no descriptions of particular events or trends or customs. Instead he produced a hugely general fact or factoid about the supposed history of the human race according to which women have lived under a billion different circumstances on ten billion different occasions. Yet he must have known that the different circumstances have never included a situation in which all the members of all the universities in the world were women; nor a situation in which all the rulers of all the nations of the world were women. Numerical exaggeration, even if it mirrored the truth, does not yield the kind of variety he needs to support his thesis. A proper way to support that thesis would involve abjuring generalization and exaggeration and instead considering particular examples of events and customs and changes in the way people live.

Stove claims that most people have always believed that women are intellectually inferior to men—a feeble reason, surely, for accepting a giant generalization about intellectual capacities.

Contrary to Stove's assertion that female inferiority is invariant it is actually quite obvious that changes in customs make a large difference in matters relating to intellectual performance, both male and female—and indeed to many other kinds of performance as well. This obvious fact strongly suggests that 'performances' often need enabling conditions as well as innate qualities of mind or body.

Enabling conditions vary from case to case. Sometimes availability of tools makes an achievement possible. On other occasions it will be money or personal diligence or good health or the encouragement of one's peers. It can happen, too, that sheer necessity triggers unsuspected capacities. To ignore these matters is rather like ignoring the fact that railway trains do not perform well in the absence of rails to run on.

Here is an example about money and encouragement:

Everyone has heard of Bhimrao Ranji Ambedkar because Bhimrao Ranji Ambedkar wrote (most of) the Constitution of India. He was an Untouchable who overcame the disadvantages of his status through sheer talent.

But was it only talent? I think not.

Ambedkar's father sent two sons to school where the younger boy persevered in spite of the bad treatment meted out to Untouchables by masters and pupils alike. He did reasonably well at his studies, though—to judge from the exam results recorded by one biographer—not outstandingly well. The Maharaja of Baroda then paid for Ambedkar to attend the University of Bombay and afterwards to proceed to Columbia University and the LSE. Another rich man, the Maharaja of Kolhapur, helped make possible the young man's further studies in London. These enlightened princes did not believe that the zero frequency of intellectual achievement among Untouchables indicated innate lack of capacity.

I am not saying, of course, that the past disadvantages of women were anything like those of untouchability. This example of an enabling condition is just that, an example of an enabling condition.

Here is an example about necessity:

Back in 1946 good Stovians would have believed that Diaspora Jews had no ability in military matters. In 1946 the only Jewish soldier most people had heard of was Dreyfus. Then in 1948 sheer necessity triggered an unsuspected Jewish capacity for soldiering, simultaneously sending 2,000 years of Stovian evidence into the dustbin.

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Here is an example about tools and wherewithal:

If Stove had lived in, say, 1800, when there were no anaesthetics and no aspirin, no penicillin, no Dettol and no X-rays, he would have told his pupils (correctly) that doctors could not cure heart disease or diphtheria or cancer and could not prevent death in childbirth or save surgical patients from gangrene. And he might also have told his pupils (incorrectly) that 'nobody disputes' the rationality of concluding that physicians have an innate lack of medical capacity. But what they lacked, of course, was not brains but means.

I will comment, finally, on some of Stove's other generalizations:

The obstacles ... which have been placed in the way of the exercise of the intellectual capacity of women ... have never been more than trifles when compared with the obstacles that have been put in the way of the practice of the Christian religion (page 34).

This statement isn't consistent with the intended implication of Stove's other claim, viz, that women have lived under a billion different kinds of circumstance and so have exhausted all the possibilities for intellectual endeavour.

Secondly, the statement is simply false. We can agree that not many things are as bad as being eaten alive by savage beasts in a Roman arena. To be prevented by law from being taught to read, as slaves were in some American states, is not as bad as being consumed by lions. Still, as an obstacle to intellectual development it is hardly trifling. Being barred from attending universities and law schools and medical schools is not so bad as being prevented from learning to read; but it is silly to suggest that those bans were not serious obstacles to achievement in the learned professions.

Wherever some defect has been found or imagined in existing arrangements for the education of females, energetic and ingenious people have *always* been busy setting up a form of education free from that real or supposed defect [my italics] (page 36).

Really? Wherever? Whenever? In Afghanistan today, for example? Or in the councils of Rhodes' trustees, who until about 35 years ago decreed, nay, assumed, that all Rhodes Scholars must be male?

... the effects [of schemes for women's education] have been singularly invariant [and] have never shown any significant tendency to bridge the gap between male and female performance ... I do not mean these schemes have never had any effect on female performance. I do not know ... (page 36).

There is a contradiction here between claiming to know that certain effects are invariant and saying one doesn't know whether there have been any effects at all.

I'm not sure that anyone knows much about the differences, if any, between the intellectual capacities of men and women. In this matter, as in the matter of racism and anti-racism, Stove tends to rely on folk wisdom. Not good enough.

Stove also tends to ignore various facts which are relevant to his topic. Indeed he ignores them even when they are right under his nose. Before about 1850 the number of women doctors, professors, lawyers, engineers, professional scientists, architects (etc.) was zero. Since that time the numbers have risen to tens or hundreds of thousands. Did Stove think no such change had occurred? Or did he think it nothing to do with 'schemes for women's education'? Did he seriously believe that the gap between the intellectual achievements (performances) of men and women has really remained uniform and invariant over the last 150 years?

I do not underestimate Stove's acumen. I think that soon after he'd read "The intellectual capacity of women" to the meeting of the Russellian Society he sat himself down in the cold light of day, and re-read it, and quickly spotted the contradictions. Then he noticed that his model of probability would not work and that his definition of capacity was question-begging. He might even have begun to doubt the wisdom of his ventures into social history.

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