

Bolzano's political philosophy

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I.

In October 1881 a group of Czech-Bohemian politicians, professors, scholars, artists and many students gathered in Prague to honour Bernard Bolzano on the centenary of his birth. The principal speaker, Dr. Durdik, summed up his long speech about the “metaphysician, theologian, mathematician, preacher and writer” as follows:

He was a German but also a whole man . . . and this raised him above all racial hatred. In the best sense of that word he was a citizen of the world. . . . From this vantage point he looked upon the relation between the two nationalities of Bohemia much like Goethe. From this vantage point this man demanded justice for the Bohemians as long as 70 years ago with such energy that even now we cannot express it more eloquently. For justice lay at the core of everything he strove for in his political life. . . . Introduce institutions as you like, but always act with justice [applause]. He clearly stated his view about the two peoples that inhabit our country, seeking the ideal solution for them in harmony and concord. . . . Even today there are occasional individuals who seek to prove that our language and our brains are not suitable for higher learning. It is a bitter burden, but we shall not be provoked. . . . Therefore in this year 1881 it is all the more desirable that Bolzano's opinions about the relation between the two peoples of Bohemia be restored. . . . His example and his writings will always speak to us. Take them to hand and read. . . . Honour the memory of this man and in him the spirit of humanity, of nobility, of light and peace! [Enthusiastic applause that does not want to end].¹

“Take them to hand and read” [*tolle lege*] is a reference, well understood by Durdik's audience, leading to St. Augustine's deliverance, *Confessions* viii, 12, and thence to *Romans* XIII, 12:

The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light.

¹“Bolzano-Feier” in *Politik* 287, Prague, 16.10. 1881, p. 5 f. Cited from Wolfgang Künne, “Geschichte der philosophische Bolzano-Rezeption,” in *Bernard Bolzano und die Politik*, ed. Helmut Rumpler, Vienna, Cologne, Graz 2000. Vol 61 of *Studien zur Politik und Verwaltung*, p. 319 f.

Durdik's speech, one of many commemorative events in Prague over the years, focused on Bolzano's contributions to Bohemia's political landscape, on his political wisdom, on his unfaltering commitment to the common good. Even during the dark days of Soviet occupation after the Prague Spring of 1968, flowers and candles on Bolzano's grave were not an unusual sight.

II.

Bolzano's major work on political philosophy is a book called *On the Best State*, which was written around 1830.² As its title suggests, the work is concerned not with suggestions for reforms of existing institutions, but rather the elaboration of an ideal, namely, an organization of civil society that maximizes the well being of its members. The approach of this work has earned Bolzano the reputation of a utopian in political philosophy, someone unconcerned with the practical, the here and now, devoted instead to the passive contemplation of the unattainable. This impression might easily be confirmed by the knowledge that he never sought to publish his book, and towards the end of his life actually resisted the attempts of others to publish it for him.

But this view of Bolzano the political philosopher is completely mistaken. Indeed, it would be difficult to find an example of a philosopher who had a greater impact on the political culture of his country. An examination of the exhortations (*Erbauungsreden*) Bolzano read weekly to the university students and educated public of Prague shows him to have been one of the most prominent advocates for reform of the time. There we find him advancing quite detailed criticisms and practical suggestions on political and social matters, arguing for religious tolerance, including full civil rights for Jews, for improvements in the conditions of women and the Czech-speaking majority in Bohemia, and for dramatic changes in contemporary institutions, among them radical reforms in the laws governing property and the abolition of hereditary privileges and offices. There too we find him training a generation of reformers. Nor did Bolzano hide the contents of his political philosophy from those he thought capable of appropriately dealing with them, for most of the ideas presented in *On the Best State* were first aired in his exhortations—but to an audience he knew to be trustworthy. The best state is considered not in order to avoid practical attempts at reform, but to give them a theoretical underpinning and clearer direction. It is worth noting, too, that after a little over 150 years, a great many ideas very like Bolzano's have been implemented somewhere or other—for better and for worse.

²*Von dem besten Staate* ed. A. Kowalewski (Prague 1932). New edition by J. Loužil in the *Bernard Bolzano-Gesamtausgabe* (Hereafter **BBGA**) Series IIA, Vol. 14.

A few further remarks about the *Erbauungsreden* are in order. Bolzano was ordained a priest in 1804, accepted the appointment to a newly established chair of religious instruction at the Charles University in Prague, and was installed in April 1805. He had won the competition for chairs in both mathematics and religion, but chose the latter because of his desire to contribute to the reform of society. The chairs in religion had been introduced in the course of the Austrian Catholic Restoration to provide religious instruction for non-theologians, and to reverse deistic and atheistic tendencies among the lay students, assumed to be a consequence of the French Revolution and the enlightened reforms introduced by the Emperor Joseph II († 1790). Accordingly, Bolzano was expected not only to give government approved interpretations of religious dogma in his lectures, which he was to base upon a book by the Emperor's confessor Jakob Frint, but also to deliver weekly exhortations, to hear confession, etc. Although by no means a revolutionary, it was clear from the start that Bolzano did not measure up to the expectations attached to his post, and as a consequence he was, predictably, in trouble with the authorities from the time he took up his duties until his dismissal in 1819. The *Erbauungsreden*, of which one volume was published in 1813, were tangible proof of Bolzano's unsuitable opinions, and quickly became a focal point of the conflict. These weekly sermons became immensely popular, often drawing hundreds of listeners, and were a central part of a movement, sometimes called the "Bohemian Enlightenment", which combined a rationally reconstructed Catholic faith with a programme for social and political reform. It was partly this popularity, partly the general ferment fostered by the Napoleonic wars, that kept him in this position for such a long time.

It has been suggested, even by knowledgeable historians like Ernest Gellner, that Bolzano was too good a logician to be a true Catholic, and that his deviations from orthodoxy were the reason he was so strongly opposed in Vienna and Rome.³ Though this article is not the place for a detailed discussion of Bolzano's philos-

³Cf. the chapter on the Czech national revival in Ernst Gellner, *Encounters With Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 136: "Early in the nineteenth century, there was a philosopher priest-professor in Prague, Bolzano, of part-Italian, part-Austrian origin, a great figure now recognised in the west as a precursor of modern philosophy of mathematics and science, and an indirect ancestor of Wittgenstein. But he was also of great importance locally, for he loved theology and mankind as well as mathematics. This other love led him to favour a non-ethnic Bohemian patriotism which would be kind to the then under-privileged Czechs (almost by definition, for those who at that time rose socially became Germanized), and a theology which in effect treated true Catholicism as a coded Enlightenment, a tolerant love of humanity rather than a claim to exclusive Revelation (No wonder that Bolzano had his troubles with the Church authorities.)" Against this it should be noted that Bolzano (in the *Lehrbuch der Religionswissenschaft* and elsewhere) argues at great length for the insufficiency of natural religion, the indispensability of revelation, and for Catholicism as a genuine revealed religion.

ophy of religion, it seems to us that this view is untenable, and that it would be more accurate to say that his troubles were due to his too strict adherence to the principles of Catholicism. It is true that he maintained that nothing in conflict with reason could belong to the content of the Catholic religion. It is also true that, while admitting the necessity of a hierarchy and associated structures of authority within the church for certain purposes, he maintained that there is no hierarchy where the content of revelation is concerned: what counts as revelation for Catholics is determined, he held, not by the Pope alone, nor by councils of bishops, etc., but by the universal consent of the church. It is true that he did not believe either the Pope or councils of bishops to be infallible. It is true that he argued against the requirement of celibacy for priests. It is true that he was a tireless critic of corruption, fraud, and hypocrisy within the church. Finally, it is true that he held fairly radical views on private property and the organization of the state:

In no way can you justify your wealth, you rich man, by claiming that the money heaped in your coffers is your property, your legitimately acquired property! No—instead you should know that if it is through your wealth that others are impoverished, then the state whose imperfect constitution has made it possible for you to amass such great wealth, this very same state has the right (has the duty, I should say) to take your wealth from you by force, and to return it to those from whom you have taken it by means far more cunning than theft! What I have just said, my friends, will forever remain true, no matter what words may flow from the mouths of foolish or corrupt jurists. It will remain forever true, even if those who say it are threatened with imprisonment and death! Sooner or later there will come a time when all of this is generally recognised! Happy us if we already follow these precepts and do not wait until wiser constitutions will force us to return our surplus. Rather let us do so of our own free will. . . .⁴

There is no denying that such teachings were bound to be unpopular with many powerful people. But all of them fall well within the bounds of orthodoxy. While there is a longstanding dispute among Catholics over whether the Pope, or certain councils, or only the whole church, is competent to decide whether a certain proposition belongs to the content of the Catholic religion, Bolzano's position has always been well represented. Certainly there is nothing unchristian about criticizing the behaviour of church personnel, or in rejecting the pretensions of religious authorities, as a glance at Matthew 23 confirms.⁵ Nor were Bolzano's views on property

⁴From an unpublished exhortation of 1812 (*Erbauungsreden*, 1812, no. 14), quoted by K. Strasser, "Politischer Gehalt der *Erbauungsreden*," in H. Rimpler ed. *Bernard Bolzano und die Politik*, p. 72-3.

⁵Matthew 23, 2-12: "The doctors of the law and the Pharisees sit in the chair of Moses; therefore do what they tell you; pay attention to their words. But do not follow their practice; for they say one thing and do another. They make up heavy packs and pile them on men's shoulders, but will not raise

out of line, unless the injunction to “Sell all you have and give to the poor” is to be dismissed as a misprint.⁶ But as one can scarcely imagine more unchristian institutions than those of Bohemia at that time (and this applies in large part also to the institutions of the Catholic Church) and more unchristian behaviour than that of many people in positions of power, it is not surprising that Bolzano’s forthrightness in pointing out the contrast between professed belief and behaviour did not meet with approval from the higher-ups.

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Bolzano was dismissed in a purge of unreliable elements, freethinkers, nationalists and progressives in Germany and Austria after the assassination in March, 1819 of the conservative playwright and diplomat Kotzebue. Charges of heterodoxy and political unreliability had been placed much earlier, and personal grievances also seem to have played a role.⁷ As early as 1806, Frint had complained that his prescribed textbook did not sell well in Prague, and later Bolzano was expressly asked to justify himself for lecturing from his own notes rather than Frint’s book. Eventually presentations were made to the Emperor, and objectionable passages were excerpted from Bolzano’s writings. Some of the most offensive remarks came from a sermon preached on the Sunday after Epiphany (Jan. 13) 1811, and published in 1813:

Each century furnishes us with new proofs of how harmful war is; of the abuses which certain social institutions inevitably lead to; under which constitutions the people are better off. And should it be impossible for our God to make us all wiser through this, to finally open our eyes, so that we will recognize with wonder how easily we might have had things better all along? O! he can certainly do that, our God; he

a finger to lift the load themselves. Whatever they do is done for show. They go about with broad phylacteries and with large tassels on their robes; they like to have places of honour at feasts and the chief seats in synagogues, to be greeted respectfully in the street, and to be addressed as “rabbi”.

⁶Bolzano reflects an old tradition. St. John Chrysostom (347-407) sold the costly plate and ornaments of his Episcopal palace for the benefit of the poor and the hospitals: “This also is theft,” he wrote, “not to share one’s possessions. Perhaps this statement seems surprising to you, but do not be surprised. I shall bring you testimony from the divine Scriptures, saying that not only the theft of others’ goods but also the failure to share one’s own goods is theft and swindle and defraudation.” *St. John Chrysostom, On Wealth and Poverty*, tr. Catharine P. Roth (Crestwood NY, St Vladimir’s Press; 1984), p. 49.

⁷These matters are discussed in W. Künne, “Die theologischen Gutachten in den Verfahren gegen den Professor und den Priester Bolzano,” in W. Löffler ed. *Bernard Bolzanos Religionsphilosophie und Theologie* (Sankt Augustin: Akademia Verlag, 2002), Beiträge zur Bolzano-Forschung, Volume 12.

will certainly make it happen. There will come a time—I say this with complete confidence—there will come a time when war—that absurd attempt to prove one's right by force—will be looked upon with the same disgust that duelling is now! There will come a time when all the thousandfold divisions and distinctions of rank between people, which bring about so much evil, will be put back within their proper bounds, so that each will deal with his neighbours as a brother with his brother! There will come a time when constitutions will be introduced which are not open to the horrible abuses which our present one is; a time when people will be educated according to nature and when they will not be glorified for greatly distancing themselves from her, when no one will think himself deserving of honour and respect because he, a single person, has taken for himself as much as would be sufficient to satisfy the needs of a thousand!⁸

The reaction to Bolzano in some quarters may fairly be called hysterical. One of his detractors described him to the Pope, for instance, as nothing less than the chief pseudo-prophet of his time.⁹ Another (anonymous) report on Bolzano's religious views ran as follows:

Anyone fooled (if such a thing were possible) by Bolzano's many seemingly Catholic statements, by his vague and indeterminate definitions, by his assurances that he was Catholic, that he believed Catholic teachings to be the most perfect, etc., would certainly be freed from this illusion as soon as he saw how Bolzano applied his concepts and principles in his Exhortations, which one may consider the practical part of his theory. To judge from these Exhortations. . . it would hardly be possible to find another heretic in the entire history of the Church who maintained so many Catholic formulations while at the same time departing in so many essential points from the Catholic Church.¹⁰

Count Saurau, then chancellor, pointed out that Bolzano's "innovations" could not be justified. In *German* universities, he pointed out, where professors must live on students' fees, new doctrines are an economic necessity; but in *Austria* professors are paid by the state "so that they must teach propositions that are approved

⁸Homily to students preached on the Sunday after Epiphany, Jan. 13, 1811 in *Erbauungsreden 1813* ed. Jaromir Louzil, **BBGA** Series 1, Vol. 2, (Stuttgart: Frommann, 1985), pp. 78-89, p. 84. The text for the sermon is Romans XI, 25 – XII, 2. Cf. Eduard Winter, *Der Bolzanoprozess* (Brno, 1944), p. 29.

⁹E. Winter, *Der Bolzanoprozess*, p. 212.

¹⁰Quoted after K. Strasser, "Politischer Gehalt der Erbauungsreden," in H. Rumpler ed. *Bernard Bolzano und die Politik*, p. 69-70.

by the church and the civil administration. It is a dangerous error for a professor to think that he can instruct the youth entrusted to his care according to the drift of his individual convictions or according to his own views.”¹¹

An imperial decree dismissing Bolzano was issued on December 24, 1819. It forbade him to teach or preach in public; ecclesiastic charges against him were laid. Hearing of his dismissal, he at once shifted his attention from the religious lecture he was preparing to a mathematical theorem he had been working on. When the resulting proceedings finally came to a conclusion in 1825, all charges being dismissed, Bolzano did not retract any of his claims, but expressed regret about harm that could have resulted from their being misunderstood.

III.

Bolzano’s contributions to the development of infinitesimal analysis are now well acknowledged; his place in the pantheon of that branch of mathematics is secure. His logical theories, revived through the attention of Brentano’s students, have also been much studied and commented upon. Less attention has been paid to his metaphysics and almost none, until recently, to his ethical and political activity and theory—this despite the central importance Bolzano assigned to these studies, and despite their previous broad popularity, leading to the publication and reprinting, during the earlier part of the 19th century, of several dozen volumes and essays. Moral concerns also motivated the writing of his logic, and even entered into its very content.

The principle of utility was the cornerstone of Bolzano’s philosophy of religion, of his political philosophy and ethics as well as of his logic, as he repeatedly claimed. “I am of the opinion that the supreme moral law demands nothing but the advancement of the common good.” He had adopted three maxims: “Advance the common good,” “It behooves us to be happy and to make happy,” and “I must progress.”¹² His utilitarian convictions were coupled with unwavering commitment to personal sacrifice. When he was eventually dismissed from office with a

¹¹Winter, *Bolzanoprozess*, p. 35 f. It is instructive in this connection to consider the following remarks, taken from an inspirational speech the Emperor Francis II delivered to the assembled Professors of the Laibach Gymnasium in 1821: “Hold to the old, for it is good, and our ancestors found it to be good, so why should not we? There are now new ideas going about, which I never can nor will approve. Avoid these, and keep to what is positive. For I need no savants, but worthy citizens. To form the youth into such citizens is your task. He who serves me must teach what I order. He who cannot do so, or who comes with new ideas, can go, or I shall remove him.” Quoted after R. W. Seton-Watson, *A History of the Czechs and Slovaks* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1965), p. 165. See also C. Sealsfield, *Austria as it is, or, Sketches of Continental Courts by an Eye-witness* (London, 1828), esp. p. 75-77, where Bolzano is discussed.

¹²From a manuscript quoted in Eduard Winter, *Leben und geistige Entwicklung des Sozialethikers und Mathematikers Bernard Bolzano*, Halle (Niemeyer), 1949, p. 60. For an exposition of Bolzano’s ethics, see his *Lehrbuch der Religionswissenschaft* (Sulzbach, 1834; New edition by J. Louzil in

pension of only 300 Gulden, he found comfort in the computation that this would be his share if all goods were equally divided. More to the point, he rigorously measured all activities, including religious pursuits, against the standard of public utility. Religion he claimed to be “the sum of such doctrines or opinions that have an either detrimental or beneficial influence upon the virtue and happiness of a person.”¹³ A proposition is of a religious nature if its consideration “not only moves us in our heart to declare either for or against it, but if through the acceptance or rejection of this proposition our virtue or happiness is altered.”¹⁴ By virtue, Bolzano means “the persistent striving to make the sum of pain in this world as small as possible, and to enlarge the sum of well being as much as possible.”¹⁵

Bolzano firmly believed in the possibility, though not indeed the universal reality, of human progress. In the homily to his students on Epiphany (Jan. 6) 1811, he calls it a “great truth” that “inspired and wholly imbued the holy bard” (Isaiah), on whose text his sermon was based: “Arise, shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee. . .”¹⁶ He thought it “highly probable” that from the early days humanity had much advanced in three important respects: wisdom (that is, science in aid of virtue and happiness), virtue and true happiness. There has been progress, he asserts:

In humanity as a whole there is visible over the centuries, and going to infinity, a progress not limited to certain arts and sciences, but a progress extending to the three most important matters: true practical wisdom, virtue and happiness.¹⁷

Nonetheless, he observed, many countries and peoples, instead of progressing, have regressed for years and sometimes even centuries.

Unfortunately, my friends, experience teaches us that we need not travel to distant countries to be persuaded of this. . . For several decades in our own beloved fatherland, instead of becoming wiser, better, and

BGA Series I, Vols. 6-8.) especially I, §§15-21, 86-96.

¹³*Lebensbeschreibung des Dr. Bernard Bolzano* (Sulzbach, 1836), p. 199. Bolzano gives a more precise account in the *Lehrbuch der Religionswissenschaft*.

¹⁴*Religionswissenschaft*. **BGA** Series I, Vol. 6.1, p. 96.

¹⁵Homily on the first Sunday of Advent 1810; *Erbauungsreden* Vol. 4 (Prague-Vienna, 1852), p. 19.

¹⁶Homily to students preached on Epiphany, Jan. 6 1811 in *Erbauungsreden 1813* ed. Jaromir Louzil, **BGA** Series I, Vol. 2, Stuttgart (Frommann) 1985, pp. 67-77, p. 69. The text for the sermon is *Isaiah* 60, 1-6.

¹⁷*Erbauungsreden* I (Prague-Vienna, 1849), p. 79. This view has been expressed many times. Most noted is Dr. Martin Luther King's “The arch of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” In *The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Harper Collins, 1986), 245.

happier we have been moving backward in all these respects and the enlightenment that only recently began to dawn has been darkened again.¹⁸

Bolzano here reflects on the recent history of the Austrian Empire. Joseph II, who ruled from 1765 to 1790, introduced many “enlightened” reforms. The “*Robot*”¹⁹ Patent” of 1771 greatly reduced the power of the manor: henceforth peasants could marry, travel, and educate themselves and their children without their landlord’s permission. But they still were not allowed to own land, a privilege reserved for the nobility. To farm a plot of land, they had to enter into long term dependencies and pay rent in labour, money or produce. Peasants in this state were still often called serfs, for example by John Stuart Mill:

In Austria . . . the labour of a serf is equal to only one-third of that of a free hired labourer. This calculation, made in an able work on agriculture (with some extracts from which I have been favoured), is applied to the practical purpose of deciding on the number of labourers necessary to cultivate an estate of a given magnitude. So palpable, indeed, are the ill effects of labour rents on the industry of the agricultural population, that in Austria itself, where proposals of changes of any kind do not readily make their way, schemes and plans for the commutation of labour rents are as popular as in the more stirring German provinces of the north.²⁰

The agricultural reforms of Joseph II did not lift the common man out of abject need. The inefficiency of the “labour rent” system so much impaired agricultural production that severe food shortages and wrenching famines could be expected every decade. A good first step, Joseph’s tenancy reform was not followed by others until much later. Only after 1848, the year of Revolution, Bolzano’s death, Mill’s *Principles* and the *Communist Manifesto*, was the peasantry allowed to own land.

Joseph’s other progressive reforms, of the justice system, of civil administration, of emancipation and religious tolerance, many of them aimed to curb the dominion of church and nobility, were under sustained and largely successful attack throughout Bolzano’s lifetime. Bohemia was then marked by all manner of oppression: of the peasant class, of the Czech majority (usually the same lot), of those deviating from Viennese orthodoxy. His courage and fervour in lecturing

¹⁸*Erbauungsreden* I, p. 72 f.

¹⁹‘*Robota*’ is the Czech word for the unpaid labour peasants were required by law to perform for their landlords.

²⁰John Stuart Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, Book 2, Ch 5: *On Slavery*.

to the large number of students that assembled to hear his homilies must inspire the greatest respect. He knew that he was addressing the future elite of Bohemia, her administrators and clergy, the propertied class. He expected that more enlightened thought, “better concepts”, once adopted by them, would in time spread into the lowest huts. But he also knew that his unorthodox views would arouse much hostility in Vienna.²¹

Mathew 9, 35-38 is the text for Bolzano's homily on the 2nd Sunday after Easter 1817. Jesus, observing the misery of a harassed and helpless people, says “The harvest is truly plenteous, but the labourers are few.” He then admonishes his disciples to go out and *teach*. Bolzano takes literally the description of the people as physically, not spiritually distressed, and Jesus' admonition as an appeal to *education*, “teaching, instruction, the dissemination of better concepts.”²² At the time of the sermon, Bohemia was experiencing a plight so harrowing that “one must wonder why people brought to such despair do not use force to seize from the storehouses what they need for their survival.”²³

I am of the opinion that we cannot do better than to follow the example of Jesus and even now seek the true cause of all calamities that afflict us in ignorance and prejudice or, in other words, in a *lack of enlightenment*. I do not want this interpreted as saying that I believe in no other cause of our suffering. I want to say only that it is most *advisable* to accustom ourselves as well as others to *tracing everything back to this one cause*.²⁴

He then gives several reasons for this policy: he denies the establishment view that it is enlightenment itself that lies at the root of the current suffering, rejecting at the same time a naïve trust in progress. Many a new opinion was acquired at the cost of giving up an older and wiser one, like the belief in immortality, in the just compensation of virtue and the punishment of villainy.

But at the present low level of knowledge one cannot with assurance say what is most needed, nor how to convey one's insights to others. It follows that the most urgent task is to improve education and remedy error and ignorance. Further, one should think of evil in the world as usually the effect of folly rather than malice, since the alternative is to sink into a misanthropic funk. And finally, it is actually within our power to improve education:

²¹On Jan. 6 and 7, 1816 He preached a sermon on “Right conduct toward the enemies of enlightenment” (*Erbauungsreden* IV, No. 28/29, p. 196 – 209), where he bemoans the promotion of ignorance as a necessary condition for exploitation, and notes “woefully that all countries of Europe are now declining” (209), that is, promote ignorance, oppose enlightenment.

²²*Erbauungsreden* I, p. 3

²³*Op.cit.*, p. 1.

²⁴*Op. cit.*, p. 4.

We expect deliverance for our aggrieved fatherland as for the whole earth only in the battle against error and the spreading of deeper insight.²⁵

Elsewhere, he describes enlightenment as:

... the appropriate development of the power of judgment in each individual citizen, as well as a certain stock of useful knowledge, especially healthy, correct concepts of everything having to do with virtue and happiness, attention directed towards the common best, direction and instruction in correctly judging whether something is beneficial or harmful for the common best; knowledge of the rights a people possess, and the ability to tell the difference between wise and unwise measures; eagerness to follow the former and hatred and opposition directed towards the adoption of the latter. Enlightenment so understood, my friends, can have nothing but the most blessed consequences, and it is certain that there is no better way to promote the happiness and well-being of a people than by promoting such enlightenment to the full extent of one's powers.²⁶

Reform was to be accomplished *only* through education. Rebellion should never be allowed, an unjust law removed only through the common conviction that it is detrimental.²⁷ Yet in the same sermon he points out that the duty to obey superiors or a law is rooted only in the benefit humanity in general derives from this. It follows that there can and will be cases in which disobedience becomes a duty.²⁸ He then gives detailed instructions on how best to engage in civil disobedience when this becomes imperative.

Bolzano was confident that the education of the masses could in the end be set in motion through the action of only a few who are united in the will to improvement. The title of his sermon on the 27th Sunday after Pentecost of 1816 is "The united effort of only a few men can at all times create a better shape of things."²⁹ Scripture, experience and reason concur in assuring us of this truth.³⁰ Indeed, the very audience of his sermons were to be the vanguard of this change in his own land.

Bolzano's *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1837 was conceived as an instrument for achieving this progress. The small group from which reform will emanate are to be im-

²⁵*Erbauungsreden* I, p. 9.

²⁶*Erbauungsreden* I, p. 62.

²⁷*Erbauungsreden* I, p. 63 (Palmsonntag 1812 [March 22]).

²⁸*Erbauungsreden* I, p. 58.

²⁹*Erbauungsreden* I, p.73.

³⁰*Erbauungsreden* I, p.75.

bued with sound logical principles. As with any other project, in the presentation of logic one must proceed in such a way that

in addition to the original purpose [i.e. of displaying the principles of logic] as much good and as many of the ends of the moral law are realized as can be combined with that purpose.³¹

The purpose of the *Wissenschaftslehre* was not merely to set out the doctrines of pure logic, but to determine and elucidate the division of all areas of knowledge into special sciences, and the manner of displaying these sciences in special treatises. Just as few men can urge reforms that spread in time to all citizens, so this one book, if properly received, should reform the way all sciences are most usefully presented. In short, the point of it was to give the right instructions to a few dedicated men for the improvement of the whole society. In this, logic is a necessity, since the most important, and indeed necessary, condition for progress is the improvement of rational thought, “the ability to judge and infer.”³²

For Bolzano, a major tenet of enlightenment is equality. Everyone must be introduced to the basic truth that the ultimate ground of all duty lies in the welfare of the whole; universal knowledge of it will have the most beneficent consequences.³³ He rejects the pervasive and refined distinctions of rank for which the Empire was notorious, the view that wealth brings honour, that extravagance has merit. Officials should be honoured only for their performance, never for rank or position.³⁴ He wants to better the lot of the countless oppressed citizens, “who seem to have been admitted into civil society only in order to work for others and witness their luxury, but are allowed no pleasures of their own.”³⁵ Everyone should work for the common good, and not merely for the pleasure of another. The state is fully entitled to coerce those who continue to exploit others, if necessary, by denying them the necessities of life.³⁶ Appallingly, it has so far been a principle of government that some persons are here only for the comfort and pleasure of others, and that, in particular, “the entire female sex is viewed as a mere utensil created by God for the satisfaction of carnal appetites.”³⁷

³¹B. Bolzano, *Wissenschaftslehre* (Sulzbach, 1837), §395.

³²*Dr. B. B.'s Erbauungsreden an die Hörer der Philos. an der Prager Univ.*, hrsg. v. einigen seiner Freunde. NF. Erster Bd., Wien 1884; p. 14. Cited from Margret Friedrich, “Bolzano’s Projekt der Aufklärung”, in Rumpler ed., *Bernard Bolzano und die Politik*.

³³*Erbauungsreden* I, p. 219.

³⁴*Erbauungsreden* I, p. 39.

³⁵*Erbauungsreden* I, p. 131.

³⁶*Erbauungsreden* I, p. 195

³⁷*Erbauungsreden* I, p. 171.

The equality of women is the subject of the homily “Of the Mission and Dignity of the Female Sex,”³⁸ again drawing on his interpretation of Scripture. Jesus taught that women are the equals of men in wisdom, virtue and happiness, the three characteristics that matter most. They must therefore be accorded the same civic rights. And since in heaven all distinctions of gender will be removed it was His will that in this world, too, both sexes should have the same claims and rights. The sermon continues

It would be better for you, O you oppressed woman-kind, if in our principles, customs, habits and civic institutions we acted in harmony with the precepts of Jesus. Then you would not be barred from all serious learning and higher knowledge that men now keep only for themselves; then no one would fancy that everything possible was done for your education as long as you are given some useless elocution training and are taught skills of a sort that entertain fools and annoy the wise; then we would not read in acclaimed writings that there can be no virtue in the female sex, that here all apparent virtue is only weakness, instinct or the effect of vanity; then men would not seize all rights and claims to earthly goods; then you would not be the afflicted part and without protection, whose lamentation no one hears, destined to live in pain and merely to serve the lust of others; then you would not tremble all days of your youth for fear that an evil fellow might fall on you in a weak and unarmed moment and rob you of all your happiness, then go unpunished while bringing upon your head the ridicule and derision of the whole town; nor would you have to fear being neglected in old age, after giving life and education to many a useful citizen.

My friends, if custom has not made you wholly insensitive to the follies and crimes our sex has committed, if you feel the great injustice that down to the present day one half of humanity has visited upon the other, then I beseech you to oppose this atrocity by spreading the truth that the female gender is as receptive to wisdom, virtue and happiness as the male and should therefore have the same rights and entitlements.³⁹

In the best state, these indignities would no longer exist. Marriage would be a free contract, women no longer given into marriage against their will. Yet in each

³⁸On the Feast of the Ascension of Mary, Wednesday, August 15, 1810, *Erbauungsreden* IV, p. 174.

³⁹*Erbauungsreden* IV, p. 177f.

household, “to preserve good order”, the man would be the head.⁴⁰ The main, if not the only, purpose of marriage is procreation.

All this must be seen against the extremely poor economic circumstances of the time. The classical problem of economics—how to distribute far too little among far too many—was very much the order of the day. Lack of adequate food, housing, and hygiene led in the familiar, direct way to very low levels of life expectancy. Children died like flies, and their parents did not fare much better. In Bolzano's own middle-class family, to take an example by no means untypical, twelve children were born to his mother, but only two survived past adolescence. Bolzano, for his part, did not expect, nor was he expected, to survive long. His health was very fragile, he coughed up blood and was subject to violent, debilitating headaches and fevers throughout his life. Things were still worse among the poor. Many children were simply abandoned (Bolzano quotes an estimate of over two thousand abandoned children in Prague in a late essay),⁴¹ destined for the most part, as he observes, either to die of starvation or disease or to end their lives in jail or on the gallows.⁴² A measure of how bad things were is given through the horizon of possibility in Bolzano's account: even in his best states, where adequate nutrition, hygiene, and health care would be provided for all, he assumes that low life expectancy and astonishingly high levels of child mortality would still be present, as if they were an unalterable part of the human biological heritage (a point we shall return to in a moment).

Against this bleak background, Bolzano remained optimistic. No stranger to the conclusions of Malthus—apparently, Bolzano often discussed the question of overpopulation with his brother⁴³—he nevertheless thought them incorrect. In his opinion, it was not want of land, raw materials, or labour relative to the size of the population which led to such widespread misery, but rather the degenerate institutions which structured most societies and, of course, lack of education.

How weak is our body, and to how many diseases is it subject, not because some inalterable law of nature demands it, but rather because we are born to weak parents, are poorly treated in our childhood, sometimes spoiled, then again completely neglected, because neither the food we eat, nor the activities we pursue, nor our clothing and housing accords with the rules of health. Can it really be doubted that a rational improvement of all these conditions of our health and strength

⁴⁰*Erbauungsreden* IV, p. 179.

⁴¹“Aufruf an Prags verehrliche Bewohner zu eine regeren Mitwirkung an dem Vereine zum Wohle hilfsbedürftiger Kinder,” *BBGA* Series II A, Vol. 14, 163-171, p. 165.

⁴²*Op. cit.*, p. 164.

⁴³A. Kowalewski, Introduction to B. Bolzano, *Von dem besten Staate* (Prague, 1932), p. ix.

can have beneficial effects? How many thousands of our brothers and sisters—O! even at the very moment I write this—go without the means for satisfying their most basic human needs, perish in their need, not because the great earth isn't rich enough in goods to supply all her children with abundance, but only because counterproductive institutions in the state allow these goods to be divided among us in such an unequal way, and because most of the earth's surface remains virtually uncultivated.⁴⁴

Bolzano speaks here of abundance, but in his best state the affluent society does not even appear on the horizon. The superfluity, it seems, will be rather small. Improvements brought about by saner institutions will not in his opinion make much of a dent on levels of infant mortality or increase life expectancy to any appreciable degree. People of a younger age—he writes tellingly at one place—always form a majority in a state.⁴⁵ The only reason why families would seek to reduce their fecundity,⁴⁶ he remarks elsewhere, is from fear of falling into abject poverty from having too many children—something which, by the way, would not be permitted to occur in the best state. A talented mathematician, he must have assumed, tacitly or not, that a very low life expectancy would always be with us—else the population would soon outstrip, if not agricultural output as Malthus suggested, at least available space: people would have to be stacked like cordwood. No, clearly for Bolzano the demographic transition which has occurred in the industrial west (and indeed was already underway during his lifetime, though by no means easy to detect) was not even imaginable at the time he wrote. This has important consequences for the way which he conceived the political institutions of the best state, as well as the condition of women. In recent times, two factors—higher survival rates for children and safe, effective birth control—have made radical changes in the lives of women possible in many countries. Why spend one's life bearing children most of whom die in infancy if this can be avoided—for it seems obvious that this time could be much better, and more happily spent? On Bolzano's principles, the question should at least be asked, provided that the possibility is recognised as a live one, but clearly, Bolzano did not think it was. Thus the "specific afflictions of this sex" would survive in even the best states. Bolzano is surely an optimist, but clearly one whose optimism was considerably tempered by the conditions of his day.

⁴⁴*On the Best State*, Introduction (BBGA IIA14, p. 25-26).

⁴⁵*On the Best State*, Chapter 2.

⁴⁶We cannot call the collection of crude, often ineffective, and frequently fatal methods then employed (swallowing large quantities of match-heads was apparently a popular method of terminating pregnancies)—and of which Bolzano evidently had some limited knowledge—birth control.

IV.

On the Best State was never meant to be a manual for government, a blueprint for the ideal society. It is, rather, an account of what he considers the institutions which would be found in the best states. Although he had, as he says, examined his opinions carefully from many different angles, he by no means expected anyone else to accept them immediately. He decided to write them down

... not in the expectation, and not even with the wish, that in a country where his thought became known one would immediately tear down its existing constitution and erect a new structure according to his plan. Such an undertaking he must rather declare in advance to be rash, and because of the disastrous consequences which it might entail, to be criminal.⁴⁷

He allows that he could be mistaken in his opinions; but even were he right, the institutions of the best state cannot be introduced all at once, but rather only gradually, over time and with great care: to ensure, for instance, that the transition is managed in an orderly way, that it is not subject to violent reversals, and that no one's rights are trampled upon in the process. Such radical changes as he proposes can only be successfully introduced, he thinks, with the consensus of the wisest and the best in a state; or better still, with the universal or near universal consent of a public *who must first be educated*. Bolzano would no doubt have been quite happy to apply Mill's judgment to his own work:

... an entire revolution of the social fabric, such as is contemplated by socialism, establishing the economic constitution of society upon an entirely new basis, other than that of private property and competition, however valuable as an ideal, and even as a prophecy of ultimate possibilities, is not available as a present resource, since it requires from those who are to carry on the new order of things qualities both moral and intellectual, which require to be tested in all, and to be created in most; and this cannot be done by an Act of Parliament, but must be, on the most favourable supposition, a work of considerable time.⁴⁸

Thus it is quite understandable that Bolzano had no wish to see his views brought forward in the midst of the tumult of 1848: the very last thing he wanted was to have his ideas clumsily taken up by a bunch of hotheads. Hence the pattern of "publication" of his treatise: circulated quite widely in manuscript copies, but only to selected, trustworthy recipients, very much in line with the *Samizdat* system used more recently in Bohemia.

⁴⁷*On the Best State*, Foreword (BBGA IIA14, p. 21).

⁴⁸John Stuart Mill, *On Socialism* (Amherst, N.Y. : Prometheus Books, 1976), p. 139.

General Organization, constitution Citizenship in the best state is a matter of voluntary adhesion: anyone who indicates an adequate knowledge of the laws of the state and shows genuine promise of respecting them may request to become a citizen, and this request will generally be granted. Children of citizens are themselves citizens until the age of majority, at which time they too must decide whether or not they wish to belong to the state, and if they do, must publicly declare their intention.⁴⁹ The best state is a republic with no head of state or chief executive. There are no hereditary rights either of wealth or political function. Well aware of the possibility of conquest by hostile powers, Bolzano thinks that a viable state must above all be able to defend itself. Accordingly, military service is universal, all able-bodied citizens being trained in the use of arms.⁵⁰

It might come as a surprise to those unfamiliar with him that Bolzano, a priest who argued that the Catholic was the most perfect of all existing religions, holds that the best state does not have a state religion. In partial explanation of this opinion, he says this:

The principle that the state should adhere to a rational religion is very true indeed. But little is won by proposing it, since the decision which religion is rational, or the most rational of all is a matter of much controversy.⁵¹

Thus tolerance is general, unless religious practice conflicts with the law. Where it does, the fact that the transgression was based on religious belief is ground for milder punishment. In line with this general freedom of religion, church personnel are to be employed and paid by the members of their respective religions, not, as was the case throughout Europe, by the state.⁵²

The state should not be indifferent to religious belief (it would do well to suppress a religion that practiced child sacrifice, for instance), but must recognise that compulsion of belief is neither efficacious nor desirable. When the state acts, it must do so with sensitivity, and under the principle that it is better to do too little in

⁴⁹*On the Best State*, Chapter 1.

⁵⁰Bolzano does not mention explicitly whether women are to be included in the militia, though some of the things he says suggest that he assumed they would not be.

⁵¹*On the Best State*, Chapter 7 (BBGA IIA14, p. 62).

⁵²Bolzano discusses relations between church and state in greater detail in *Ansichten eines freisinnigen katholischen Theologen über das Verhältniss zwischen Kirche und Staat* [Views of a liberal Catholic theologian on the relations between church and state] (Sulzbach, 1834). Published anonymously. See also: "Über das Recht der Geistlichkeit, ihren Lebensunterhalt von Personen zu beziehen, welche nicht ihres Glaubens sind. [On the right of clergy to draw their living from people who are not of their faith] Eine Abhandlung nach B. Bolzanos Ansichten von einem seiner Schüler bearbeitet." [actually by Bolzano] *Freimüthige Blätter* (Stuttgart, 1838) Vol. 11, pp. 291-331 and Vol. 12, pp. 5-47.

this area than too much. If it seeks to eradicate superstitions or otherwise harmful religious beliefs, it does so through enlightenment. Similarly with the spreading of beneficial religious doctrines. There is no heavy hand here.⁵³

Freedom of expression is subject to some important limits. The state is the sole publisher of books, and publication is subject to state censorship. It should be noted however, that censorship can only be imposed on certain well-defined, limited grounds (among these, interestingly enough, are a book's not being worth reading or treating contentious matters with inflamed rhetoric instead of in a measured way). It should also be noted that a book can only be refused if the censors are unanimous in their rejection.⁵⁴ This is a frequent pattern in Bolzano's proposed institutions—many of them have very strong powers, but powers which can only be exercised if extremely strong tests are met.

Democracy is for the most part direct: measures are voted on by all citizens who have sufficient knowledge of what is at issue (Bolzano thinks universal education will increase this number greatly) and who have an interest in the outcome (regulations required to implement laws can be determined by the administration without being put to a vote). The idea is that a vote is a kind of crude measure of the aggregate effect of a piece of legislation; if all interested parties vote according to their interest, one obtains a measure of how many will profit, how many will suffer. If proposed legislation has effects upon those who cannot vote—for instance, because they haven't yet been born—the state appoints a number of people to consider the issue from their point of view. The results of their reflection are then published throughout the state, so that a better decision can be made. Women, as one would expect, have full voting rights. Special provision is made for married couples, however. If they can reach agreement among themselves, they have a vote, and indeed their vote counts for two single ones. If, however, they cannot agree, they get no vote. This is, one will remark, what would happen in any case were they to vote independently—Bolzano's proposed measure, however, compels married people to attempt to arrive at a consensus among themselves beforehand.⁵⁵

In the best state direct democracy is not absolute, however, and this for two reasons. First, because the measure yielded is, as remarked, often a crude one. Second, because (due to the assumed low life expectancy) young people always make up the majority in a state, and are more often swayed towards poor decisions by their passions and lack of experience than are the older citizens. Bolzano thus proposes a check on direct democracy in the form of a council of elders.⁵⁶ This is, as he describes it:

⁵³*On the Best State*, Chapter 7.

⁵⁴*On the Best State*, Chapter 16.

⁵⁵*On the Best State*, Chapter 2; the provision for married couples is suggested in Chapter 21.

⁵⁶"*Rath der Geprüften*", literally, "council of the proven".

... a number of people of both sexes who are elected to this honour every three years in the communities in which they live by a majority of votes. [...] Only people who are more than, roughly, sixty should be chosen for this office, and among them only those who have through repeated tests given evidence of their uprightness as well as their insight, and who have shown themselves to be resistant to strong temptations. [...] People under sixty years of age who have given extraordinary proofs of their uprightness and extensive knowledge can be chosen for this office, but in no case should anyone under forty be chosen.⁵⁷

The powers of the council of elders are extremely strong, but require near unanimity in order to be exercised. A majority in the ratio of 9-1 is sufficient to overturn any legislation passed by general plebiscite, while an even stronger majority is required to pass measures even against the result of a general plebiscite.

Executive posts in the best state are filled through elections. Only the local executives are directly elected by their constituents. Higher-level executives are elected by those occupying the lower levels from their own ranks. The idea, evident here and indeed throughout Bolzano's institutions, is that judgments of character are best made by those who know the people in question. At the community level all know each other, and thus the local administrators (or the members of the council of elders) can be chosen on the basis of well-grounded judgments of character. For the higher levels, since it is not possible for many people to be so widely known, the local administrators, who do get to know each other in the course of carrying out their duties, are in a better position to judge.⁵⁸ The basis in personal acquaintance is crucial in Bolzano's institutions—from it derives, notably, the moral authority of the council of elders, without which rebellion and disregard of the law would be far more likely.⁵⁹

Some judicial functions are assumed by the administration (for example, decisions made at lower levels may be appealed at higher levels), others by special judicial personnel. Criminal justice is structured in a way opposite to our practice: the judges are enjoined to make determinations of facts, of guilt and innocence, while juries are called upon to assign punishment within limits prescribed by law.⁶⁰ With judges, as with administrators, Bolzano thinks it best that no one makes these activities his sole occupation.

⁵⁷ *On the Best State*, Chapter 2.

⁵⁸ *On the Best State*, Chapter 2.

⁵⁹ *On the Best State*, Chapter 4.

⁶⁰ *On the Best State*, Chapter 27.

Civil law cases are, if possible, adjudicated by an arbiter chosen by the parties. Criminal courts can mete out all manner of punishment, including prison, public humiliation, occasional corporeal punishment and the death penalty for premeditated murder. There will be no public executions; a “machine in a dark dungeon” will kill the criminal. Confessions are not needed to convict. If they were required, torture would soon be introduced.⁶¹

In addition to civil and criminal courts there will be annual findings by censors elected by the community concerning the behaviour of all citizens over the age of fifteen, whether they have industriously contributed to the common good, kept their noses clean etc. Mothers will be praised if they have borne and raised many children, and especially if their sons are persons of merit.⁶²

Social institutions Perhaps the most striking part of Bolzano's best state is the system of social institutions. He proposes universal public schooling for boys and girls, including health and sex education. There are publicly funded universities for a certain number of students.⁶³ There will be holiday schools for the general population (used to transmit information on health, industrial techniques, etc.), and public libraries in every community, public art museums, concerts, etc.⁶⁴ The state also maintains a network of trails, furnished with inns, and subsidizes walking tours.⁶⁵ Medical care is socialized: each community has at least one doctor whose primary responsibility is to look after public health (living and working conditions, safety of food and water supply, etc.), but who is also responsible for acute care. Based on calculations of utility, older doctors are to deal with the most dangerous cases (so much for seniority). Hospitals and training and research facilities are also state-funded.⁶⁶ The state, as discussed below, is also to provide housing for all its citizens.

All costs of raising children are borne by the state. This is done for the following reasons: 1) the distribution of children among citizens is far from uniform—some people have none, others a few, still others many; yet 2) everyone in society benefits from the rearing of children. Bolzano's arguments are still highly relevant, and worth quoting at length:

One could of course object that it is not fair to demand from people who have no children or perhaps even remain single that they should

⁶¹ *On the Best State*, Chapters 25, 27.

⁶² *On the Best State*, Chapter 27.

⁶³ As was the case with military service, Bolzano does not explicitly mention whether women are to attend universities, though the remarks in the sermons quoted above suggest that they would.

⁶⁴ *On the Best State*, Chapter 8.

⁶⁵ *On the Best State*, Chapter 23.

⁶⁶ *On the Best State*, Chapter 9.

contribute to the maintenance of other people's children. Another objection might be that when children learn how little they cost their parents they would love them less. But these are trivial objections. What possible injustice could there be in obliging the childless to turn over part of what they can spare precisely because they themselves are childless to those that are blessed with children? Will not the efforts of these same children, once they are adults, be a benefit to those people? Can they not reasonably hope to be honoured as if they were their very parents? Must not every human being hope, in his old age, not to remain behind lonely and as the last person in God's creation? Must he not wish to be surrounded by younger, more robust persons who nourish and tend to him and support him in his last agony? Those who have no children of their own can expect this important service only from the children of others. It is only proper, therefore, that they should help to raise them. If this means nothing to you, you uncaring lot, tell us what you would do if the families with children, or who expect them later (and they are by far in the majority), unite to extinguish you from the face of the earth because you are pitiless, you small minded lot, and do not want to give up, as long as you live, anything that is yours? Finally, I fear nothing from the concern that these arrangements would diminish the love of children for their parents. The love of children for their parents does not stem from the calculation, which becomes possible only in later years, of how much they have cost their parents. It arises from altogether different conditions, conditions that will not be changed in the least by the way in which I picture the relation between parents and children in the best state. It will not change when adolescent children learn how much the state has contributed to their sustenance. They will understand that they owe infinitely more to their parents' love.⁶⁷

Although the state bears the costs, families, to whom the care of children naturally falls, retain the responsibilities of childrearing save in exceptional cases of abuse, parental neglect, death of one or both parents, etc.—even in such cases, however, the state seeks to place the children in other families. There are no orphanages, at most temporary shelters.

The state also undertakes to provide social security, incomes for those who are unable to earn enough for their needs due to age, disability, sickness, etc. In addition, the state will provide insurance for a variety of natural disasters and misfortunes. It should be noted that Bolzano saw the necessity of keeping a tight rein

⁶⁷ *On the Best State*, Chapter 26 (BBGA IIA14, p. 129-130).

on these schemes—those who are unduly careless with insured property, for example, would be subject to punishment.⁶⁸ One might wonder why all this activity is to be entrusted to the state, especially since Bolzano was aware of some private insurance schemes. It seems reasonable to speculate that the fragility and limited size of the schemes Bolzano knew of led him to believe that only the public sector could successfully do what is required.

Finally, it is the state which supports most of the activity in the arts, and which is the sole support for scholarly activity (living expenses, laboratories, books, etc.).⁶⁹ The state is tolerant with scholars, especially in view of the fact that—in contrast to physical labourers—it is often difficult to determine whether or not they are truly working.⁷⁰ But the tolerance is not permanent—there is no absolute right of tenure here. With only rare exceptions, neither artists nor scholars, he thinks, should devote all of their time to these activities. Poets and musicians should not, as a rule, give up their day jobs. Scholars, if only for the sake of their health, should spend part of each day doing some sort of physical labour. Similarly, no one should spend the whole of his or her life in physical labour. Those who go down the mines, for example, would do so only for a limited term, in the interests of their health and leaving room for other occupations which contribute to the improvement of the mind, etc.⁷¹

Only certain cultural events are supported: Poems are learned and recited, but only if they improve virtue. The creation of new works of art is encouraged only if there is reason to suppose that they are at least as good or better than what is already available. There will be no theatres:

One does not allow whole groups of people to occupy themselves with the imitation of various opinions and emotions, and to seek honour in the art of seeming something other than what they really are.⁷²

Card games are allowed, but not to excess, and there will of course be no smoking, no lotteries, and public drunkenness is punishable.⁷³

Economic institutions Property rights, like all other institutions of Bolzano's best state, exist only insofar as they serve to further the maximization of virtue,

⁶⁸*On the Best State*, Chapter 26.

⁶⁹*On the Best State*, Chapter 14.

⁷⁰*On the Best State*, Chapter 12. We are unable to detect even the slightest trace of irony in this observation.

⁷¹*On the Best State*, Chapter 12.

⁷²*On the Best State*, Chapter 17 (BBGA IIA14, p. 111).

⁷³*On the Best State*, Chapter 24.

wisdom and happiness in the state. There is no automatic right of ownership either for the discoverer of the manufacturer of a thing. Bolzano observes that although absolute property rights are often spoken of, limitations are almost always present—for example, the state may levy taxes on property, force someone to sell a certain parcel of land in order that a road may be built, or requisition ships, etc. in times of war. With some plausibility, he interprets these limitations as indicating that, at least in practice, property rights have, however imperfectly, generally been subject to considerations of utility. In the best state, this is recognized more explicitly. Sometimes there are property rights of the familiar kind, but more often limited, related rights (e. g. the sort of property rights one has when borrowing a book from a public library). At the limit, each designation of something as a person's property should be subject to the test of maximizing the general well-being, as judged by the community and its administrators.⁷⁴

Many of the now common property rights do not exist under such a scheme. An object useful to only one citizen must become his property. It follows that each citizen owns his own body, for each can use his own body for the common good better than anyone else.⁷⁵ It is sometimes argued that certain libertarian conclusions can be drawn from the ownership of one's own body, for example that utilitarianism is false, and that the only obligation to others is to stay off their backs. We think, on the contrary, that Bolzano's view is perfectly consistent, and that not much can be deduced from the mere assumption that we own our bodies.

There are further property rules: an object without use to a person cannot be his property. Finding an ownerless object does not confer property rights, neither does making a thing useful by mixing one's labour with it. Rare and precious, but otherwise useless, things cannot be the property of any individual but will fall to the community. One can give up property rights, but cannot simply transfer them to another, nor can one indiscriminately lend a thing, or money, to others. Just as property cannot be given away in life, so also not in death. Upon death it falls to the state, not to children or other heirs. Certain objects, books and paintings that can be enjoyed by many without losing their value cannot be the property of individuals. Bolzano then discusses in refined detail under headings and subheadings the value of labour.⁷⁶

These intractable and absurdly expensive rules are to be explained, perhaps, by noting that at the time there simply weren't very many goods which could serve as property; thus it may well have seemed reasonable to expect that these few things could be wisely allocated in the way suggested. (One of the cases Bolzano

⁷⁴*On the Best State*, Chapter 10.

⁷⁵*On the Best State*, Chapter 10 (**BGA** IIA14, p. 74).

⁷⁶*On the Best State*, Chapter 10.

considers is whether a man who has gone blind should receive compensation when his monocle is given to someone who can use it.) A rather large caution, however, is added to this provision, one which would certainly be felt much more strongly today:

The state's authorized intervention in determining the citizens' property and its exchange is limited only by the concern that it should not go so far as to aggravate the citizens who find the attainment of their self-interested goals hampered by this intervention to a point where the peace and order of the whole is endangered.⁷⁷

Bolzano is especially critical of existing arrangements concerning housing, which allow landlords to gouge their tenants. He begins by noting that, generally speaking, a house accommodating five to six families brings in enough rent to support its owner's family even after all expenses for upkeep, etc. have been paid. He comments:

How unfair! Without doing any work at all, one family is allowed to live off five others, that is, lays claim to a sixth of their income! Can anyone deny that this is an atrocious practice, hardly better than that of the *Robot* system?⁷⁸

He proposes instead that houses should be the property of the state, and that those who live in them should be charged fair rents, namely, what is required for their maintenance and for the formation of a capital fund for rebuilding when necessary.⁷⁹

Absolute equality in terms of wealth is neither possible nor, were it so, would it be desirable. In the best state, greater wealth will be obtained not so often by chance (e. g. by accidents of birth, or by lotteries), as by diligence, frugality, and efficiency; a certain inequality in wealth is thus not only to be tolerated, but a good thing, since it serves as a further incentive to cultivate these virtues. But inequalities of wealth are to be kept within limits. Bolzano suggests that no one should have personal wealth of more than 100 times the average, in the interests of limiting possibilities for corruption and the exercise of undue influence.⁸⁰ He thought of this question in terms of wealth rather than income, perhaps because at that time so few people had salaries.

Taxes are to be levied in accordance with the following principles: they should be designed to affect mainly those of above-average wealth; they should not be so

⁷⁷*On the Best State*, Chapter 10 (BBGA IIA14, p. 87).

⁷⁸*On the Best State*, Chapter 20 (BBGA IIA14, p. 114-115).

⁷⁹*Ibid.*

⁸⁰*On the Best State*, Chapter 6.

steep as to enforce absolute equality; and, in doubtful cases, one should rather tax too little than too much. No absolute limit is set on taxation: “A high rate of taxation must not be thought to be evil as such; it becomes so only when this income is improperly applied.”⁸¹ There are sales taxes, notably, on luxury goods, and generally taxes are higher the more dispensable a thing is. One of the most important sources of income for the state is the inheritance tax, which is 100 percent, but does not apply to items of only personal value. Political resistance to such inheritance taxes is to be lessened by ensuring that the state seek above all to provide for the costs of raising children—the principal reason parents wish to pass their wealth on to their children. Bolzano is careful to note that adequate provision for children must be assured *before* 100% inheritance taxes are introduced.⁸²

The best state will not forego the use of money. Precious metal for will be used for international trade, paper money for internal transactions. Bolzano envisions a consumer price index, based on “a list of the most common necessities for each district.”⁸³ Obligations will be based on the value of the currency when the contract was signed, not when the goods are delivered.

V.

In the foreword to *On the Best State*, Bolzano tells us that in his view, the book was “the best, most important legacy he could leave to mankind.” At the same time, he reminds us that his aim was not a perfected and complete political theory, but only to produce a worthwhile, useable contribution to the field. With this in mind, how do things stand with Bolzano’s little book?

As always with Bolzano, many of the things he says can easily lead us to confuse him with one of our contemporaries—his arguments in favour of publicly funded health care, social security and the like could have easily found a place in the political discussions of the twentieth century or even in some places today. Once under this impression, we are astounded to find him saying some of the other things he says. The wholesale assignment of economic functions to the state, for instance, appears so unworkable as to be plainly bizarre, and when, in the light of subsequent developments, we see the powers he seems willing to grant to the state, it is enough to make our blood run cold. This is just something one has to get used to with Bolzano. He often saw very far indeed and quite clearly, generally much farther and more clearly than his contemporaries, but like the rest of us did not see everything.

⁸¹ *On the Best State*, Chapter 26 (BBGA IIA14, p. 125).

⁸² *On the Best State*, Chapter 26.

⁸³ *On the Best State*, Chapter 11 (BBGA IIA14, p. 90).

Clearly, Bolzano lacked a good deal of important information when he wrote. He seems to have had no inkling of the demographic transition that was taking place during his lifetime. His state is designed around a population distribution heavily weighted towards the young—a pattern typical of third-world countries today, but one that is no longer found in many modern societies. His institutions are also designed for small societies, where personal acquaintance can be relied upon to determine the best people for various jobs. It is far from obvious how such institutions might be scaled-up for societies as large and anonymous as those found today. Despite a few clever ideas, for example a system of automatic inflation adjustments for intragovernmental transfers, his grasp of economic theory seems to have been quite poor. Conspicuous by its absence in his discussions is an institution which was to become increasingly prominent during the nineteenth century, namely, the joint-stock corporation. Because of this, he tends to assign far more responsibilities exclusively to the state than would be considered reasonable today. In marked contrast to many later political philosophers, however, he comes to endorse socialist institutions not as a countervailing response to industrial capitalism, but rather in large part to take on many of its beneficial functions, notably, to distribute risk, pool resources, and increase production. We shouldn't be surprised at the gaps in Bolzano's understanding here—industrial capitalism clearly didn't exist in Bohemia when he could observe it. It was with the image of peasants spending an entire day to bring a few eggs to market that he wrote that the state should take over all transportation of goods—the free market, clearly, was not providing what was needed, and no other alternative seemed to be available.

This being said, the number of reasonable, practical suggestions Bolzano makes is remarkable. That social security, health care, education, should be looked upon as public goods that it is reasonable for the state to provide is now widely accepted, and has played an important role in the well-being of the citizens of many countries. Other of his suggestions, though not as widely adopted, are still very much worth consideration. Among the most important of these for many developed societies today, it seems to us, is his claim that the raising of children should be considered a public good, and financed by the state. Although this is recognised to some extent in many countries, the shocking levels of child poverty in some very wealthy countries (including ours, Canada) shows us that Bolzano still has a point. Also interesting is the suggestion that people who are not able to vote on proposed measures—including children and future generations—should nevertheless have their point of view represented in legislative debates. One might consider, for example, appointing as members of a legislature advocates for children or future generations, etc. Bolzano's conception of a Council of Elders as a solution for structural imbalances in judgment due to demographic factors suggests that it might be a good thing to consider demographics when creating legislative

regimes. In many countries today, it might be argued, distributions of the voting population weighted towards the top may have effects just as damaging to the long term well-being of their citizens as those caused by heavy concentrations of youth, since each age has characteristics that can lead to distortions of judgment. If the young are typically more impetuous, the old may be unduly resistant to change, and so on. Finally, it should not be forgotten that Bolzano's book envisions a time when the best state would embrace all the people of the world. When we consider the injustices, the obscenely unequal distribution of wealth in the world today, and the dependence of wealth, opportunity, even human rights on accidents of birth, Bolzano's project remains very timely indeed.

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While the worked out doctrines of *On the Best State* still have certain points of interest, it is difficult to agree with Bolzano's estimate of the work as his greatest legacy. Certainly his contemporaries—most of whom knew nothing of the book—thought that his most important contributions lay elsewhere, namely, in his successful efforts to educate the people of Bohemia. Due to the organisation of higher education in Bohemia, Bolzano had as students many of the people who would go on to occupy positions of authority in the country. Though he wrote and taught in German, he was a very important figure in the Czech national rebirth. He communicated not only the concepts of justice, of the essential equality of all people, the insignificance of differences of language and of rank, but also the skills of political action and democratic decision-making. Though he himself had quite definite views on the shape of the best state, he constantly reminded his contemporaries that politics is a collective activity, requiring the construction of a consensus among the wisest and the best. The faults of one person's thinking—be they due to features of his personality, the limits of his knowledge in some area or other, or other factors—need to be balanced by the strengths of others'. Even then, he reminds us, it is best to proceed slowly in political reform, for even the most solid consensus may be mistaken. There can be no doubt that his efforts contributed materially to the development of a healthy, largely tolerant and democratic political culture in Bohemia—something of an anomaly in Central Europe. "The most beautiful and durable monument he leaves us" Karel Havlicek wrote on the occasion of Bolzano's death, "is the free movement of thought in our country, which was in large measure the fruit of the seed that he spread."⁸⁴

⁸⁴*Narodni Noviny* 22 December 1848.