Readers with a taste for satire and sharp intellectual argument will find a feast of both in this anthology of the late David Stove’s philosophical essays. Stove’s satirical force was not just directed against philosophers. Those targeted include cultural theorists, Marxists, relativists, feminists, Charles Darwin and his followers, as well as Plato, Berkeley, Kant, Hegel, Popper, Kuhn, Lakatos, Feyerabend and many others. Although the current age prides itself on being ‘transgressive’, this pride has created its own political, intellectual and cultural orthodoxies. Stove attacks these orthodoxies fearlessly. Some of Stove’s more important themes include his attacks on irrationalism, idealism, postmodernism and a range of conspiracy arguments (including neo-Darwinian arguments) which encourage a sense of human powerlessness.

This anthology draws on the full range of Stove’s published work. There are essays here from his books *Anything Goes: The Origins of the Cult of Scientific Irrationalism*, *The Plato Cult and Other Philosophical Follies*, *Darwinian Fairytales* and *Cricket Versus Republicanism*. The introduction, by Roger Kimball, offers other pleasures, as it is studded with some of Stove’s funniest and most acid insights from other works.

Stove writes to both outrage and delight. What other philosopher, for example, would have dared to compare Kant’s success to the rabbit’s invasion of Australia? Some phrases are written with an ear for the horrified protest they will provoke, as when he describes the late 1960s as ‘those five fell years for Western civilization!’ Other passages reveal his relish for discovering and exposing the absurd:

> We . . . can now neither remember nor imagine the confidence which Western civilization had for two hundred years invested in the finality of Newtonian physics, but it is scarcely possible to exaggerate it. The shock of disillusion, when it came, was correspondingly great. To philosophers like Popper, the moral was obvious: such excessive confidence in a scientific theory must never be allowed to build up again. The most ‘irrefutable’ of all such theories has turned out to be not irrefutable at all: very well then, Popper will say, like the fox in the fable, that irrefutability, even if our theories could achieve it, would be a bad thing anyway. The parallel would be complete if the fox, having concluded that neither he nor anyone else could ever succeed in tasting grapes, should nevertheless proceed to write many large books about the progress of viticulture.

Stove’s withering analysis of idealism from Berkeley through to present-day postmodern versions exposes both the flimsiness of its chief argument and its self-flagellating, ‘sado-masochistic’ appeal. He notes the dominance of the argument that ‘We can know things only as they are known to us, THEREFORE We cannot know things as they are in themselves’, and its effectiveness in turning people towards idealism. He then goes on to ask whether a realisation that ‘We can eat oysters only insofar as they are brought under . . . physiological and chemical conditions . . . THEREFORE We cannot eat oysters as they are in themselves’ would have converted
everyone to gastronomic idealism. Why has an argument no better than the one about the oysters deceived so many, he asks? This family of arguments (which he designates as ‘Gem’ arguments) are no longer merely used to shore up idealist philosophy. In modern humanities departments, Stove notes, these arguments have become an intellectual orthodoxy:

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

Characteristically, the fact that the ‘Gem’ is now an orthodoxy merely motivates Stove to attack it more vigorously.

Throughout this book, Stove has a sharp eye for misleading arguments, while his own analysis is both stinging and entertaining:

You offer people two propositions: ‘No one can act voluntarily except in his own interests,’ and ‘No one can act voluntarily except from some interest of his own.’ The second is a trivial truth, while the first is an outlandish falsity. But what proportion of people can be relied on to notice any difference in meaning between the two? Experience shows very few. And a man will find it easier to mistake the false proposition for the evidently true one, the more willing he is to believe that everyone is as bad as himself, or to belittle the human species in general. (Darwinians call the latter ‘bridging the gap between man and the animals.’)

In commenting on other philosophers, he is similarly acidic:

Nozick prefers those philosophical questions which ‘make us tremble.’ Well, he should love this one: which of us will not tremble before so mortal a question as ‘How is nature itself possible?’ Kant has asked it, but will even he be able to answer it? If he cannot explain how nature is possible, there is little chance that anyone else will be able to do so. It may therefore even turn out that this is one of those cases in which the answer is ‘No how,’ and that nature is not possible after all. Wretched luck for nature if so.

Two of Stove’s most controversial essays, ‘On the intellectual inferiority of women’ and ‘Racial and other antagonisms’ are included in this anthology. Stove has often been personally vilified on the basis of these essays, so it may be useful to set them back in the context of his life. What relation did they have to his beliefs and actions? The link between these essays and Stove’s life is not bigotry but something else: Stove’s absolute and, some would say, over-confident belief in the power of clear thinking to dispel prejudice.

Stove acquired a certain notoriety during his lifetime because of his outspoken opposition to affirmative action programs. Whereas affirmative action programs are generally accepted as good counteractive measures against subtle and often unconscious biases, for Stove affirmative action meant deliberately introducing a bias into thinking about people. He believed that each person’s ability both could and should be judged without general biases of any kind. He responded scornfully to claims by feminists that the small proportion of female academics at Sydney University revealed biases in appointments. When he wrote that a philosopher in the
midst of an argument would not notice whether the person they were arguing with was a man, a woman or a broomstick, he may have been mistaken about the way in which subtle biases might have influenced academic selection processes at Sydney University. (This is a matter which is open to debate and inquiry.) But his comment was certainly entirely true of his own philosophical arguments. I can still remember the intellectual freedom his classes gave (a greater freedom than I have ever known before or since). As an 18-year-old girl in Australia in the mid-1980s, it was extraordinary to be addressed in exactly the same way, in the same tone, as the 70-year-old male student sitting beside me. In David Stove’s classes, bodies did not exist. Only minds mattered. Stove was thus able to hold a general belief that women were intellectually inferior without it influencing his stance towards any individual, male or female. (He would have thought it ridiculous to allow a preconception to interfere with his judgment in this way.) His comments about race fall into a similar pattern.

In both essays, though, there is an assumption which is both interesting and contestable in a theological context. Stove’s writing was frequently fiercely anti-religious. He refers to human beings, for example, as ‘the cleverest land mammal there has ever been’. Such language is clearly provocative, but in these two essays there is occasionally a sense that Stove is taking certain things for granted, rather than always being intentionally provocative. His key assumption, from a theological point of view, is that human beings are fixed and measurable objects, that they can be readily judged and described. There is no sense that human beings are mysterious, that their behaviour under different circumstances might be wholly unpredictable. There is a confidence that both people’s abilities and people themselves can be judged and measured. (One might want to turn to the work of Emmanuel Levinas for a very different view.) Stove’s value in a theological context comes partly from the extreme nature of his views: he forces his opponents to clarify their own.

Stove’s belief in clear thinking inspired both his fearlessness and his exasperation with academic fads and obscurantist language. Ultimately, this belief leads Stove to write with both slashing wit (‘Feyeraband . . . enjoins the reader of Against Method, indeed he pleads with him, not to take what was written in that book too seriously. This was undeniably handsome, in fact irresistible, and for my part I willingly closed with the offer’) and with a certain air of cheerfulness, even of optimism. Despite the prevalence of madness, Stove seemed to believe, pockets of common sense and clarity would survive. Stove’s wit is a vital (and enchanting) aid to such survival.