

## EGALITARIANISM: PARTIAL, COUNTERPRODUCTIVE, AND BASELESS

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### *Introduction*

Egalitarians hold that some good things should, in principle, be distributed equally among all people. *Which* good things? Why just those and not others? Why are they to be equalized only among humans and not, say, between humans and cats? And why is the equalization to be confined within the borders of the author's State, rather than practiced over the whole human race (at least)? Those are all matters for the particular egalitarian to explain, as best he can. None, I think, can be explained satisfactorily, but we cannot press such matters in the present short essay.

For present purposes, we assume that what they propose to equalize is the welfare, or perhaps the conditions or 'opportunities' for well-being, in the populace in question, and that the way they want to do it is, whatever else, by taking money, involuntarily, from people with higher incomes and transferring it to, or otherwise spending it on behalf of, people of lower income.

Equalization could be advocated in another way – as an ideal, to be supported by the individual consciences of fellow enthusiasts. But we are considering here the claim that equality of the type in question is a demand of *justice*, to be imposed by force of law. Whatever we may think of the first idea, our question is whether there is good reason to accept that we ought to take from the Above-average, *by force if necessary*, and transfer it to the Below-average, in the respects deemed relevant by the egalitarian, in order to bring about equality. This view is quite popular among theorists and, of course, politicians. Its popularity is increased greatly if other considerations are allowed to attenuate the egalitarian programme in practice, so that only *some* transfer from Aboves to Belows is made: equality, in that case, would be only a *prima facie* requirement, which might conflict with others. If the right 'others' are admitted, the result could be to nullify completely the practical effect of egal-

itarianism.<sup>1</sup>

However, we will not concern ourselves about such possibilities here. I shall argue that egalitarianism is, in a word, wrong in principle, appealing to liberalism in making this claim. Other political views could 'support' egalitarianism or inequality or anything one likes. But they, I think, aren't appeals to reason, and as such are ineligible for consideration here.

I shall show, first, that contrary to what seems to be generally thought, egalitarianism is, in the ways really relevant to morality and politics, *partial* rather than having the sort of august impartiality usually credited for it. Second, it is baseless: the arguments mostly given for it are invalid, have obviously false premises, or involve misunderstandings. And third, it is counterproductive, in respects that can hardly fail to matter to egalitarians.

Three clarifications are needed at the outset.

1. What we are discussing is egalitarianism, not what we may call 'welfarism' or the Safety-Net Principle – that persons in severe need have a right to public assistance in order to bring them to some tolerable, but modest, level. Logically, that can be affirmed without egalitarianism. Income transfers from everyone above the safety-net minimum to those who would otherwise fall below it could easily be from those *below* average to those at the bottom, as well as from those above average to those below – the rationale is simply different. Again, in a society where real incomes ranged from £50,000 to £50,000,000, egalitarianism would still call for redistribution from the extremely well-off to the merely very well-off.

In fact, I deny welfarism too, but that is not necessary for denying egalitarianism. I suspect that most who profess egalitarianism are really safety-netters at heart. That is one of many confusions behind egalitarianism; the question, 'But what will you do about ragged families starving in the streets?' is simply beside the point here. Too often, welfarism is equated with egalitarianism. But wrongly. If welfarism is to be defended, better reasons should be found.

2. Our subject concerns normative political theory, which I take to be part of morality. The subject is not depiction of a 'way

<sup>1</sup> For example, if one tries, as does Professor Rawls, to mix liberty principles with equality principles, making the former 'lexically prior' to the latter, the effect of equality could be nil. See the author's 'A Puzzle about Economic Justice in Rawls' Theory,' *Social Theory and Practice*, 4 (1976), pp. 1–28.

of life,' a formula for individual happiness, or a view of the meaning of life, but rather, rules for the (large) community, or better (as assumed henceforth), everybody. In the words of Aquinas, a moral theory imposes a uniformity. It proposes a set – a single set, however complicated – of rules, declaring that all should adhere to it. But this uniformity need not be egalitarian in the sense defined above. The one basic set of directives to which everyone ought to adhere, and by reference to which the conduct of anyone may be called to account, could be wildly inegalitarian (as with slave moralities.) Universality – sameness of rules for all – is a defining feature of morals; egalitarianism is not.

3. Egalitarianism proposes a set of what, in a now familiar sense, are 'positive' requirements on everyone. This contrasts with 'negative' requirements, which require us to *refrain* from certain acts towards others. Specifically, one is to refrain from harm to others: we are not to kill, maim, injure, steal from, cheat, or lie to others. Yet one may satisfy all of these requirements, and do absolutely nothing: in one's sleep, one kills or lies to no one. But the egalitarian believes, very reasonably, that if people are left to themselves, guided only by constraints against harms, then some will end up very much wealthier than others, very much better supplied with the material (or other) conditions of the good life. He doesn't like that, and insists that those who do better may be forced to share their gains with those who do worse – an entirely different idea from mere non-harm.

A related confusion would have it that Universal Non-Harm is egalitarian anyway, on the ingenious ground that it requires everyone to inflict the same amount of harm on all: none. But that simply isn't what egalitarians hold. On the contrary: the Universal Non-Harm Principle is the obvious *alternative* to egalitarianism. It is, I think, because egalitarianism conflicts with the negative morality of the Non-Harm Principle that it is unacceptable.

### *Liberalism*

I argue that egalitarianism is 'wrong, or at least incompatible with liberalism.' Recent writers alleging to be liberals don't often bother about defining what they believe, but in fact it is not particularly difficult to do so. It may be sufficiently identified by just two theses:

First, liberalism denies that government or morality is justified

by its tendency to benefit those in power. Justice is not 'the interest of the stronger party.' Both liberals and conservatives hold instead that the only justificatory purpose of legislation is the good of the ruled – those whose behaviour is to be controlled.

Second, there is the question how 'the good of the people' is to be understood. Here lies the special feature of liberalism. It denies the very natural-sounding idea of Plato, Aristotle, and perhaps most people, that if government is for the good of the people, surely the rulers should find out what is good for people and then use the laws to make them good rather than bad. Liberalism, on the contrary, holds that it is the preferences, the values held by *those very people* that is to guide legislation, whether or not those preferences accord with others' notion(s) of 'the good.' We may discuss the good with people, of course, and urge them to do things our way; but we may not force them to do so: individuals may live their lives as *they* see best. Rules for the community are justified exclusively by their conduciveness to that end – or rather, that very diverse set of ends.

The values referred to in the preceding are not, of course, people's *opinions about* moral and political rules. That is conventionalism, not liberalism; the opinions about moral rules held by most people may be illiberal. (Democracy provides an excellent case in point: most laws made in democracies are illiberal; equating it with liberalism is a major error.)

So much is common ground among all persons alleging to be liberals, and few forthrightly reject liberalism today. Any view holding that something is good for someone and can be acted upon even though that person denies that it is good for him, is non-liberal so far as it goes. But there is a further division: should we try to maximize the aggregate good of all, though liberally conceived? Or ought we instead to work, somehow, for the good of each individual person? The aggregative view invites criticisms that utilitarians have been subjected to for decades: can't the good of some thus be sacrificed to the greater good of others? Familiar criticisms of the 'individualist' view claim that it can't be achieved: we cannot keep people's goods sufficiently apart that we can promote the good of some without affecting others. Of these, the individualist interpretation is correct, I hold; and its claimed problems are manageable for political purposes.

In principle, aggregative and individualist views are fundamentally opposed – though, since it is impossible to say what the aggregative view really entails in practice, it may be held to coin-

cide with the individualist view in real-world effects. Still, the difference is crucial for theory, where the advantage lies with the 'individualist' view. Practical justification, the liberal sees, must be in terms of the interests of all those whose actions are in question. Political and moral measures are for *everyone*; they call upon all to do or refrain from what they might like to do. If we claim that some rule is justified, then the question to whom (or for whom) they are so arises, and can only intelligibly be answered, 'To all of those involved' – which, for morals, is everyone. So our principles must aim at the best life for everyone – meaning, for each person, himself *and* everyone else. Either we accept the broadly contractarian idea of society as an association for mutual advantage, whose rules, therefore, are only such as are necessary for that end; or we leave out some people and become illiberal in one way or another.

Well, why not make one's living by theft, murder, or cheating? An important question – but irrelevant here. For our question is not what you should do, but what *we*, all of society including you, should permit or forbid. Those who use force declare war on the rest. We obviously won't put up with that. 'Might makes right' is an *irrational view of political philosophy*.

Taking rational justification seriously narrows our options. People differ widely in their preferences; some ways of life are even claimed, plausibly, to be simply incommensurable with others. If that is true – and it's plausible – egalitarianism makes no sense: if what is valuable for Jones can't even be compared with what is valuable to Smith, we can't even say that the transfer of something from one to the other is an 'improvement.' However, I won't assume that fascinating but disputable thesis.<sup>2</sup> More fundamental considerations defeat egalitarianism.

In order to have a discussable subject, we must leave our characterization at a pretty high level of abstraction, letting aspiring egalitarians decide just what, in particular, they wish to equalize. Let us just say that the egalitarian holds (1) that there is some significantly desirable variable *F*, such that more *F* is better than less for each person who gets it, and (2) that justice requires that *F* be, as nearly as possible, possessed equally by all. Justice requir-

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), argues along these lines – but arrives, I think, at the wrong conclusions regarding social policy. What he shows, however, is that we can invoke a morality that is the same for all, despite the incommensurability in ways of life among those who are to be subject to that morality.

ing it, let us remember, means that people *have no choice* whether to participate in the equalization; the recalcitrant may be compelled, if need be.

Whether it is possible to arrive at a reasonable value of  $F$  will matter only if the basic idea is right. The argument of this essay is that it isn't. A morality imposes a uniformity on the community: a set of rules, the same for all, requiring all to do or refrain from something. What, then, are those rules? The answer I will defend is that they consist of the Universal Non-Harm Principle, plus at most a modest mutual-aid principle, and nothing else – not nearly enough to yield egalitarianism.

The reason lies deep in the basic idea of political/moral justification. In such matters, there is a constraint: the rules and structures for politics and morals are rules for everybody, structures that embrace *all* – the widest group of people among whom interaction does or might take place. The only premises that can validly generate rules that everyone will reasonably be subject to must be held, or be deducible from what is held, by every person. But people differ. If we expect others to follow a certain rule, how can we do so? That they will be forced to follow it is not a good answer when the question is, what justifies applying that force in the first place? But that is how it will look unless our answer appeals to the reason of the individual affected. Anything else is pointless. Thrasymachus does not have a 'political theory'; he simply swaggers about, inviting assassination. But neither does Plato, nor any non-liberalism. All such views fail for the same basic reason: the only relevant premises are those held by the individuals for whom these rules are framed.

Each of us has sets of preferences, values, ideals. Others may come along and persuade us to modify some elements of the set, to be sure. But to add to the set by persuasion is to show that the proposed new value was really called for by something we already hold, or by that plus demonstrable facts; otherwise it would not be persuasion, but non-rational influence. Would-be Platos are quick enough to offer such – the 'Noble Lie.' But we must dispense with such shenanigans and try to sort out the situation insofar as reason does bear on it. And what it does have to do with it specifically is this: a political view is justified only if it can be shown to be to the advantage of *each person*, in his own terms.

*The Common Good is the Object of Politics*

Thus, a political system or a set of moral rules must be, as Aquinas puts it, for the *common good* of all. 'Common' means that each and every person shares in it; leaving anyone out makes the system irrational. There are no natural kings or gods – only people, each with his own mind, his own preferences, facing questions about what to do – in the present context, how to act in relation to his fellows. People are not unamenable to influence by others; yet each decides, appraises, deliberates, and acts on his own results, which may or may not have been accepted from someone else.

If we seek the reasoned compliance of all to a political and moral programme, we need, of course, an account of practical reason. Much ink has been expended on that matter – most of it unnecessary for our purposes. It suffices that each person has a set of preferences providing his criteria for the pursuit of value. He acts rationally when he acts in such a way as to do best by what he values. In view of that, what modifications are necessary when he takes into account the facts about his fellows? That's our question.

Since person A is guided by a distinctive profile of preferences, usually rather complex, we may again divide the cases into two: those who share a given preference of A's – co-workers and friends; and those who do not – almost everyone. I do not assume, and have doubts about the very intelligibility of, the sorts of things commonly attributed to liberals – that individuals are fully formed entities apart from their communities, egotistical 'atoms' devoid of sentiments regarding others, etc. Nothing said here presupposes or requires such claims.<sup>3</sup> Still, people differ. So, which rules that A can support, no matter who A may be, have useful application to him *and the rest*?

Interaction with others of differing purposes can be conflictual, making for the worsening of the situations of one or both parties, from their own points of view. Alternatively, it can leave both better off, or at least none worse off, despite differences in preference profiles. The rational agent, wanting to minimise his losses and maximize his gains, will aim for a set of rules that enables him to do the best he can, on balance – as does everyone else. When potential conflict is appreciable, both parties are

<sup>3</sup> David Conway's recent book, *Classical Liberalism: The Unvanquished Ideal* (London: Macmillan, 1996), ably discusses communitarian and conservative critiques of this type.

motivated to put forth time and effort which, on their own terms, could be better spent. We should look, then, to alternatives in which no one loses – both gain, or at least neither is worse off, than if they had simply avoided the interaction altogether. Person A cannot expect others to accept rules that can work to their detriment, nor vice versa. Therefore, we must look for rules that are *to no one's detriment*, and at the same time, that afford as much actual gain as possible to each. Such gain, therefore, cannot be at net real cost to anyone else.

The fundamental rule of a community, then, is what we may call the Moralised Rule of Pareto: that *no one may gain by imposing losses on others* – the Non-Harm Principle, famed in Hobbes, Locke, Kant, Mill – as well as Confucius and any number of others,<sup>4</sup> including, I think, the common sense of essentially everyone. The basic rules of society forbid everyone to better his own situation by worsening that of anyone else; and they *allow everything else*, for to ‘forbid’ in the relevant sense is to support the imposition of penalties, which worsen the lot of those on whom they are inflicted, and is thus forbidden by the harm principle. Once we accept the basic idea of liberalism, there is no real alternative.

This confines interaction to what is mutually agreeable: neither party is to regard his own outcome from an interaction as discernibly a worsening; thus he is either unconcerned or positively disposed. We may, as I have argued elsewhere,<sup>5</sup> also accept mutual obligations of minimal aid: if one can render great help to B, at small marginal cost to oneself, then one ought to do so. But this, as noted, doesn't support the welfare state – even if it worked! – let alone egalitarianism.

Certain preferences are inherently incompatible with the liberally conceived common good: hatred, malice, contempt, envy, jealousy, spite, sadism, and others. They require for their satisfaction the worsening of the situation of someone else. Clearly such attitudes cannot be tolerated; they necessarily conflict with what morals and politics exist to promote. Obviously we cannot expect the acquiescence of anyone in a loss simply in order to satisfy someone else's desire that he undergo that loss. A political system

<sup>4</sup> The contemporary *locus classicus* for the logic of this situation is David Gauthier's *Morals by Agreement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). Gauthier calls it the Lockean Proviso: see Ch. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Jan Narveson, *The Libertarian Idea* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), Ch. 18, pp. 245–268.

promoting the satisfaction of jealousy, envy, hatred, etc. is irrational, dividing the community into discordant parts rather than uniting it.

Public rules are enforced at public expense: the means of coercion are allocated from the public treasury, at everyone's cost. (Thus, Derek Parfit's restriction to cases in which entitlements and distributive deserts are not in question excludes the political realm.<sup>6</sup>) To use taxes for putting down certain people whose actions are harmless to others is to misuse them, to impose on some just for the benefit of others, denying the common good. But common good is always in principle possible: people *can* always refrain from imposing on their fellows.

The common good can only be general liberty: non-imposition by anyone of loss to anyone else, including the loss of preventing, by force, what would harm no-one else. Such general liberty is good from each person's point of view, in being the absence of an evil – namely restriction on his own pursuits – that is genuinely possible. People can always impose evils on others, and everyone is likely to have motivation for such impositions: gains for one, by using others without their consent, injuring their bodies, stealing their efforts without agreed compensation. Everyone's being required to desist from such activities, and confine themselves to such as are not contrary to the socially compossible sets of interests of anyone else, is the only formula for universal morality that makes sense in liberal terms.

### *Egalitarianism and Partiality*

Egalitarianism forces persons who exceed the average, in the respect deemed by the theorist to be relevant, to surrender, insofar as possible, the amount by which they exceed that average to persons below it. On the face of it, therefore, egalitarianism is incompatible with common good, in empowering some people over others: roughly, the unproductive over the productive. The former's interests are held to merit the imposition of force over others, whereas the interests of the productive do not. Yet producers, as such, merely produce; they don't use force against others. Thus egalitarianism denies the central rule of rational

<sup>6</sup> Derek Parfit, 'Equality or Priority?' – The Lindley Lecture, (Lawrence, Kansas: Department of Philosophy, University of Kansas, 1991), p. 2; and 'Equality and Priority', this volume, p. 203.

human association. What could be thought to justify this apparent bias in favour of the unproductive, the needy, the sick, against the productive – the healthy, the ingenious, the energetic? What are the latter supposed to have done to the former to have merited the egalitarian's impositions? The answer can't be, 'Oh, nothing – they're just unlucky!' or 'We don't like people like that!' A rational social theory must appeal to *common* values. By definition, those have not been respected when a measure is forced upon certain people against their own values.

### *Arguments for Egalitarianism*

Egalitarianism requires, then, an argument, explaining how these *prima facie* unjustified incursions against part of a community do not, after all, really do what they appear to. In the brief space remaining, we can address a few of the major arguments for egalitarianism. Some have been implicitly addressed above, however, so I can – as I must<sup>7</sup> – be brief.

1. Let's first dispose of what is perhaps the most frequent 'defense': intuition. The theorist looks out upon the world and is somehow offended by the presence of disparities. If he were God, he would have done things differently! So he turns to the rest of us – especially, to those of us who might be above the line – and says ... well, what? Some such thing as, 'there is this objective truth about justice that you haven't noticed: it is wrong that you should have more and they less – so fork over!' This is a 'ploy,' and one that has been refuted above. Assertions about rules that are not grounded in people's actual values are useless. We can simply reply, 'Either show me some reason for accepting this – or stuff it!' But intuitions are 'self-evident': no reasoned defence of them is possible. If they are not accepted by all – as egalitarianism obviously isn't – they stand refuted as moral proposals.

There are intuitive claims, some of which may even be truths, in, say, gastronomy: I know of no *reason* for my preference of chocolate over vanilla or my aversion to Brussels sprouts. Nor is it entirely clear whether I have 'reason' for admiring Haydn's string quartets or the Bartok Concerto for Orchestra. I can point to many fine features – but if you don't see it, what more is there to say *to you*? For just that reason, all agree that I am within my

<sup>7</sup>The publishers have imposed a strict limit on the length of these essays. We contributors write in a straitjacket!

rights to stick to my preferences on these matters – and they to theirs. But this is morals in action, the social contract, not aesthetics: each is entitled to his own taste in art and veggies. If tastes have no reasons for them, no problem! – so long as they don't try to impose them by force on others. But *everything* in politics is a 'problem': political measures entail costs. Unless they can be justified by resultant benefit to those imposed on, in their own terms, they are defeated. 'Intuitions' are absurdly weak reeds to lean on here. If Jones shares them he'll write out his cheque willingly; if not, he won't, and no reason has been shown why he should. Proponents of intuition can, by definition, offer no reason. In matters moral and political, intuitions belong in one place: the waste-basket.

2. Some appeal to social peace, as motivated by the desire to avoid the wars that might begin due to people's envy. But envy is unacceptable: *society* can't kowtow to the envious any more than to anyone else, and if it does, it will end up like Yugoslavia or Sri Lanka. If the envious have grievances, we must hear them; if found wanting, their case is refuted. Munich, as the world discovered, is not the way to peace, 'in our time' or any.

3. It has been fashionable to assert that the 'rich' are so *at the expense of* the poor. That is obviously relevant: theft, of course, is wrong. But is the charge true? Exactly the reverse, in fact. People occasionally gain by theft – but such cases contrast with typical others, where gain is achieved by peaceable exchange, without deception, violence, or any other infringements of the general Principle of Non-Harm. Wealth is created in human society by people exerting themselves in various ways: by applying ingenuity to nature, or moving desirable products around in ways useful to all concerned, in commercial exchanges or freely given and accepted charitable transfers. To call this 'theft' is either to fail to look at the phenomena, or, more likely, sheer question-begging – as when A's having more of some good than B is claimed, *ipso facto*, to 'harm' B. Such tactics are irrelevant insofar as they amount to sheer expressions of envy; or false if it means that A's having more than B entails that B's situation is, as appraised by B's own preferences (apart from his envious ones), worse off than B would have been in that respect if A had not done the thing in question. In the case where A has a natural, e.g. genetic, advantage, then of course what he 'did to acquire' it is nothing, and thus couldn't have done anything to B. And in the commercial case, it's exactly the opposite of what is claimed: A's having

more from free exchange with B causes B to have *more*, not less, than B otherwise would.

4. A thesis made familiar by Rawls, has it that social arrangements ought to correct for the arbitrarinesses of nature, which are guilty of 'moral irrelevance'.<sup>8</sup> Suppose A has more than B because A is more talented than B. A's talents are due to his genetic constitution, which of course A can have done nothing to deserve. Therefore . . .

But that's the trouble. Rawlsians seem not to have noticed that what actually follows is *not* the egalitarian conclusion desired – that we should help matters out by transferring from the fortunate to the less fortunate – but instead, that *nobody deserves anything at all* – neither the fortunate *nor* the unfortunate. If justice is served by depriving people of what they came by as the result of morally arbitrary processes, then we must take *everything* from *everyone* – a kind of 'equality', I suppose, but hardly what they had in mind. The argument is, in short, a howler, overlooked by people convinced in advance.

Of course we do not use notions of desert this way. Those who win the prize by being naturally talented do, often, deserve it: they exceed the others in relevant ways. 'Moral arbitrariness' has bite when it is a matter of being given more on the basis of what the rewarders do *not* offer the rewards for. Unfairness is possible, to be sure: but not via Rawls' argument.<sup>9</sup>

### *Counterproductivity*

An immensely popular argument, thought to provide a clear utilitarian defense for egalitarianism, appeals to a principle of 'diminishing marginal utility.' The idea is that the marginal return from possession of some measurable good decreases as a function of the amount one already has – money being the most familiar and obvious case in point. From this it is inferred that general utility will be promoted by transferring such goods from those above the midpoint to those below, where the marginal utility of unit increments is much greater.

Two major flaws destroy this argument. The first is fundamental:

<sup>8</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), esp. pp. 100–108.

<sup>9</sup> I have examined the idea of 'desert' in the context of deserving profits in business, in 'Deserving Profits', in Robin Cowan and Mario J. Rizzo, *Profits and Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); see especially pp. 61–68, and 73–85.

general (aggregate) utility simply isn't a common value, and therefore cannot be appealed to. Individuals are not necessarily concerned to promote the aggregate sum of good. They are mostly concerned to promote the goods of certain particular persons – themselves, friends, countrymen, whatever – and not the sum of utility, even if that sum could be objectively determined. It is therefore inadmissible to appeal to it. Only if the particular individual addressed can be shown that what matters to *him* will be forwarded if the aggregate of utility grows – sometimes plausible, to be sure – is he rationally interested in its growth. That special case apart, utilitarian arguments are dismissed.

Second, and more important for present purposes, the argument suffers from myopia: it focuses only on the *consumption* utility of money. But all good things come from somewhere: namely, human effort and know-how. Allocation of those requires investment. But the poor, obviously, do not invest – the better-off do that. A well-invested dollar yields goods and services in the future greatly exceeding the stock of consumption goods one could buy with the same money. The marginal utility of dollars in the upper incomes is therefore *greater*, not less, than the marginal utility of dollars for the poor.

Some who see the myopic nature of the argument propose to replace free investment by individuals with one or another kind of state-imposed substitute. It would take us too far afield to explain in detail why that is a mistake, and in any case, that has been superbly done by others.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, the benefits of freedom of commerce, of exchange, of economic activity in general, are obvious from the viewpoint of Common Good. No doubt the rules of social interaction are sometimes successfully violated: people will sometimes lie, cheat, and steal, and will get away with it. But insofar as a free enterprise system consists of what it is defined as – namely, voluntary exchange for mutual benefit, constrained by a rule against harming outside parties – then it is obvious why it is the only economic 'system' consistent with common good. Forcible intervention to make everyone join a cooperative, by contrast, violates it. There is no reason to change the rule, though just which measures to enforce it are called for is a large question. But a different one.

<sup>10</sup> See especially David Ramsay Steele, *From Marx to Mises* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1992); and Scott Arnold, *Market Socialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

Further reflection on this leads to an important further point against egalitarianism: that it is essentially certain to be counterproductive as well – to defeat the very values whose equalization is required by the theory. Forced transfers from rich to poor, from capitalists to proletarians, will *worsen* the lot of the poor even as it decreases the wealth of the rich. Not only is egalitarianism biased, but the particular people against whom it is biased are the *productive* – the source of what the people it is biased in favour of hope to receive in consequence. It is not too much to say, even, that egalitarianism is a conspiracy against those it claims to be trying to help.

There is a reason for this, whose incomprehension by philosophers even to this day should be a matter of astonishment. A free economy is one in which no one forcibly intervenes against the property rights of any other – all are free to use their resources as they judge best, including engaging in commercial exchanges. In such a system, the only ways to achieve wealth are by means which *improve* the situations of *others*. Successful businesspeople become so by organizing or financially supporting the production of things that other people want, and want more than the existing alternatives – since those people, having no obligation to buy, would not otherwise buy them. The only other possibilities are fairly uninteresting: gift, and the discovery or ‘original acquisition’ of valuable things. But gift, as such, is pure transfer and does not create wealth, except in the form of good will. We may praise occasional acts of charity, but if everyone were only charitable and unproductive, all, including the poor and sick, would quickly die. And as to acquisition, if we would attain to wealth, those items must be harnessed to human use – nature does not afford a free lunch any more than our fellows. Even someone who acquired a natural beauty spot, say, and keeps it natural, will be able to make a decent living thereby only if he is able to charge others for the right to enjoy that spot. And so on.

In short, successful investment enhances the lot of others in society. When people are employed, this enhances their real incomes, more than any other opportunities they may have had. And when they spend their money, it is because they judge that expenditure to contribute maximally to their well-being. Thus, if we wrest the gains from investment or well-paid work from the investors and workers in question, we take from the productive and transfer to the unproductive. This takes money that would have produced more and ensures that it will be used in less productive ways. A large society that undertakes this kind of activity extensively

decrees poverty for itself, in comparison with what it could have done instead in a freed-up market. And it is the poor, *above all*, who benefit, relatively speaking, from commercial activity – activity that, if unimpeded, continually drives down prices, continually finds new employment for available labour, and continually real-locates resources in the way that does most good for most people, as indicated by the actual choices and preferences of those people.<sup>11</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Egalitarians can only defend their view by reference to values that many or most people *do not have*. People below the mid-point of the proposed redistributational scale will, of course, have some reason to rejoice at their unearned egalitarian windfalls – temporarily. Meanwhile, people from whom they are wrested have the opposite motivation, so common good is out the window from the start. Nor can equality relevantly be held to be an ‘objective’ or an ‘absolute’ value – a value in itself, that doesn’t need to be held *by anybody* (except the theorist himself, of course). That is intuitional talk, which has already been dismissed.

Do real people (as opposed to theorists) care about equality as such? No. They want better and more reliable food on the table, nicer tables to put it on, TV’s, theatres, motorcars, books, medical services, churches, courses in Chinese history, and so on, indefinitely. Equality is irrelevant to these values: how much of any or all of them anyone has is logically independent of how much anyone else has. People are rarely free of envy, to be sure. Most people would like to be better than others in some way – and some will pay others to let them look down on them.<sup>12</sup> But few will make themselves worse off in order to make some other people equally badly off.

Values that can be improved by human activity are not independent in any other way, though, for production is cooperative,

<sup>11</sup> Sample details for the real-world partially free-market case of America are provided by Charles Murray in *Losing Ground* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), Chapter 4, ‘Poverty’. The figures, showing that poverty was *decreasing* prior to the onset of Federal anti-poverty programs, and *increased* dramatically once they got going in earnest, are all derived from official sources – not conjectured by Murray or synthesized by some ‘right-wing think tank’.

<sup>12</sup> I am aware of the very interesting thesis of Robert Frank, *Choosing the Right Pond* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). But his findings have no bearing on public policy, however much they affect the management of office pool furniture and the like.

requiring arrangements agreed to by a great many people – workers, financiers, engineers, customers. Nobody can attain to wealth, insofar as the free market obtains, without others likewise benefiting. These are truisms, though I am aware that they will be seen by many readers as ‘ideological’ – even at the present time, when the absurdities of alternative views of economics have been so completely exposed.<sup>13</sup>

The conclusion stands, then, that egalitarians propose measures incompatible with Common Good, conceived in liberal terms. Appeals to ‘equity’ that are not simply question-begging fail; appeals to moral intuitions are useless; appeal to the arbitrariness of nature is irrelevant; appeals to marginal utility are of questionable basic relevance, and exactly wrong insofar as they are relevant.

Society, I conclude, should make no interference in the free actions of individuals in using their resources as they see best, by their own lights, within the constraints of a no-harm-to-others rule. There is no socially acceptable case for forced equality.

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<sup>13</sup> Perhaps the most important source for the serious reader is David Ramsay Steele’s book, cited in note 10.