

FORMULATING EGALITARIANISM: ANIMADVERSIONS ON BERLIN

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I

George Lichtheim rightly remarks that "the rationale of socialism is not economic growth, but social equality and the abolition of the wage relationship."¹ I think that these should be key aims in attempts at the transformation of society, but I am also perfectly aware that there are some non-socialists who are likewise committed to social equality and I am also aware that equality may very well be an essentially contested concept and that, even where some conception or cluster of conceptions of equality are taken to be canonical, it is an ideal which is seriously challenged by libertarians and other neo-conservatives. But it is also true, as Isaiah Berlin remarks, that the ideal of equality is one of the oldest and deepest elements in our moral thought.² It has been of immense importance in our social thinking.

What I think both defenders and critics of egalitarianism should start by recognizing is that we are not very clear about what it is we are committed to when we say we are committed to social equality. Let us try at least to give a sufficient elucidation of the concept of equality to make it somewhat more evident what we are committed to in being egalitarians or, for that matter, in rejecting egalitarianism, and let us further see what kind of justification, if any, can be given for that commitment.

It might well be thought that we are no more in the stew about the concept of equality than we are about any other concept. Philosophically, we are, or can easily become, puzzled by almost any concept, but this is a kind of purely second-order puzzlement that does not imply any failure in paradigmatic situations, at least, to understand what is involved when people claim to know something to be true, probable, certain and the like. We surely, some will say, know, or at least often know, what we are fighting for when we struggle for, defend or argue for, equality. We clearly want a state of affairs in which people are not discriminated against simply because they

are Blacks, Catholics, women, homosexuals, Arabs, Communists, over thirty, and the like. We know, if we believe in equality, that we ought not to tolerate discrimination based on birth, inherited property, religion or race. We can translate these things into the concrete and we indeed have a tolerably clear understanding – a knowledge by *wont* – of what is involved in a commitment to social equality.

I do not for a moment wish to deny this. But I am unsure as to its force or import and I would want to add that this understanding is surely not without its puzzles, not all of which are second-order puzzles. We egalitarians believe, for example, that we 'must be color blind' but in countries such as the present day United States, many egalitarians also believe that in universities Blacks should be given special treatment. That is, some egalitarians believe that there should be massive financial aid, special admission standards, special courses, and perhaps – where Blacks wish it – segregated dorms. It is here that our very sense of justice and egalitarianism may commit us to advocating, in certain circumstances, differentiated treatment that some might say is still plainly unequal treatment.

Given these complexities, what is it to be an egalitarian? We are often quite unclear just what sort of differences between human beings count as inequalities which we should work to eliminate. Yet it is plainly absurd to deny that there are such differences. Are there, for example, no relevant differences between men and women, children and adults, aged and non-aged, mental defectives and people of normal intelligence which we should take as grounds in certain circumstances for differential treatment? And if we admit some are, are we, in effect, abandoning or qualifying egalitarianism? Some have said – though they have been critics of egalitarianism – that a 'true egalitarian' will recognize no differences between people as justifying differential treatment.³ But this seems at least to be absurd. Do we really want to say that a thorough egalitarianism would commit us to attempting to blot out all differential treatment? Would it commit us to an across-the-board treatment of people in an identical way? To do anything like this is, to put it mildly, highly questionable. Well then, just what does egalitarianism commit us to? What is this equality that most of us take to be so desirable? It is easy to get a kind of vertigo here for (1) philosophers and social theorists have said many different and frequently conflicting things about equality, and (2) when one thinks about this politically and morally important, but still perfectly ordinary, concept, it is easy to feel quite at a loss what to say.

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It has been said — supposedly as an elucidation of what we ordinarily would say — that “to say that all men are equal is the same as to say that all persons who are in the same situation have the same rights.”⁴ But this cannot be correct, for an inegalitarian who believed in a rigid and complicated caste system in which one’s caste was determined by birth and carried with it great privileges, if one was of a higher caste, and which also took others to be untouchables, could, quite consistently, assert that all persons, who are in the same situation, have the same rights, for, he would add, plainly the people of different castes are in different situations and thus do not have the same rights. So if we accept the above definition of ‘equality’, we are committed to the absurdity that a believer in the Indian caste system could also consistently be a believer in equality.

Nietzsche could, and indeed would, say the same thing for his ‘higher men’ and ‘lower men’. But people with such ideas are plainly not egalitarians and do not believe that all human beings are equal. Such a characterization of what it is to say all persons are equal confuses what is very likely a necessary condition of such a conception with a sufficient condition.

Can we find a better characterization of equality that does not collapse before counterexamples, is not so vague as to be thoroughly problematical and/or does not pack into its characterization of equality conceptions that we would ordinarily associate with distinct and perhaps conflicting notions in such a way that our ordinary conceptions of equality get radically transformed?

I will start this examination by looking at the account of equality given by Isaiah Berlin.⁵ I chose Berlin because he combines two virtues which are rarely found together: (1) an understanding of analytical work in philosophy and (2) profound erudition in the history of political theory. Given such a background, what Berlin says about a concept such as the concept of equality, deserves careful consideration. (I should further remark, parenthetically, that Berlin, politically speaking, is a liberal. We should, I believe, ask, as we read him, if this skews his account in any important way.)⁶

II

In asking what is it to believe in equality, let us commence with what Berlin has to say about the famous formula ‘Every man to count for one and no one to count for more than one.’ It seems to Berlin to “form the heart of the doctrine of equality . . .” (14) Vague as it is, it constitutes “the irreducible minimum of the ideal of equality.” (14) Yet, though people from diverse traditions have ac-

cepted this formula, all the same it is not a claim which is obviously true and it has not been accepted by all people.

Looked at abstractly, Berlin argues, this egalitarian formula is a specific application of the principle that similar cases should be given similar treatment. The application is that people are similar in belonging to the class of human beings and thus, since they are all members of this class – they have this similarity – they “should in every respect be treated in a uniform and identical manner, unless there is sufficient reason not to do so.” (15) However, Berlin’s other argument in the paragraph following this remark, seems to me to belie his claim that ‘Every man is to count for one and no one to count for more than one’ is a specific application of ‘Similar cases should be treated similarly.’ Moreover, the latter is a truism it would be very hard to deny. Egalitarians and non-egalitarians accept it, while the former is a controversial proposition not everyone would accept.

Each man – that is, every man taken distributively – is a member of many different classes, for example, animate object, warm-blooded creature, primate, white man, Canadian, Albertan, Calgarian, etc., etc. Each man will be similar and dissimilar to every other man and indeed to non-man in certain respects. So whether Jones and Zorba are similar cases or not – and thus are to be treated alike or not – cannot be read off from knowing they are both men. A man could accept the principle similar cases are to be treated similarly and deny that all men should be treated similarly on the grounds that they were too dissimilar to be correctly treated as similar cases. If x and y are similar cases, it would indeed be unjustified and unjustifiable to treat x differently from y , unless there were sufficient reason to do so, and what would constitute a sufficient reason for differential treatment would be the discovery of a relevant difference between them. But how, then, do we determine ‘*relevant differences*’? In every instance when we are comparing people there are similarities and dissimilarities. How do we determine those which are *relevantly* different? The principle, treat similar cases similarly, will not help us here.

There is indeed a way in which ‘Every man is to count for one and no one is to count for more than one’ is an application of ‘Treat similar cases similarly’ but not in the sense that you could derive it from this latter formula or rightly justify it simply by reference to that formula. Supplementary arguments and considerations are required.

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A non-egalitarian could take it to be trivially true that one ought to treat every member of a given class or group as you treat any one member of it, unless there is some sufficient reason not to do so. He could quite consistently accept that truism and not have the slightest temptation to switch to being an egalitarian. There are people — people I, like most others, regard as Neanderthals — who would reason in the following way: *x* is a Black and *y* is not, so, though they are both human beings, there is sufficient reason to treat them differently, for Blacks are just so black and this, when intermarriage and the like are at stake, is just too distressing. But still such a racist treats like groups alike.

When it comes to the question of whether we have sufficient reason to justify differential treatment there does not appear to be any widespread agreement on what would justify differential treatment, though in a given era *in particular cultural circles*, there will be considerable agreement about what to do in certain types of situations.⁷ But Berlin is surely right in pointing out that, in making clear which reasons are sufficient and why, that people with different attitudes, moral commitments, ideologies and beliefs about the world will assess the situation differently. There is nothing which even remotely approaches a mechanical decision procedure here or a reflective consensus. It is even far from evident whether we have any generally acceptable general principles here in virtue of which we can, in a non-ad hoc or at least a non-situational way, state or even recognize and operate with principles in accordance with which we could decide when not to treat members of a given class similarly.

III

The idea is very widespread, particularly in liberal circles, that no man shall have claim to better treatment than another in the absence of good grounds being given for such a preferred treatment.⁸ To many that will seem almost an undeniable commonplace. But there are iconoclasts, including some rather thoughtful ones, who think that such a conception involves unreasonable demands because they believe that there are such profound, evident, and massive differences between human beings that the burden of proof is on the egalitarian to specify grounds for similar treatment. Unless, they will say, we can give some reason to believe that stupified peasants or people destroyed by ghetto life will behave like civilized men, we have good grounds for treating them differently. As Nietzsche remarked, there are some things their unclean hands should not touch. That it is the

inequalities for which a case must always be made for them to be justified has not seemed evident to many people particularly in other places and at other times. That the tides of cultural fashion cut against these people does not show that they are mistaken.

Berlin to the contrary notwithstanding, in a society committed — say on religious grounds — to a belief in divisions of caste, as part of the natural order of things, an equal distribution of benefits would not seem to be the natural, self-evidently right social arrangement standing in no need of justification. Whether it is felt to stand in need of justification depends on the background assumptions that are made about human nature, society, and the like. But these background assumptions are themselves controversial and little is achieved where fundamental issues of justification are at stake in simply assuming one rather than another such controversial thesis. That an assumption is deeply embedded in our culture does not justify it.

The recognition that similar cases must be treated similarly will not enable us to ascertain which way to go here. Those of us who are liberals or on the Left tend to assume that “equality needs no reasons only inequality does.” (17) But can we, in any objective fashion, justify this assumption? (Berlin at the very end of his essay (32–3) says things which conflict with that standard liberal view and cut more in my direction. It is difficult, at times with Berlin, to know when he is characterizing a view and when he is defending it. In any event the view he sets out in the earlier part of this essay and which is frequently defended in liberal circles is vulnerable to the criticisms I have just made of it.)

IV

Some might attempt to justify this liberal assumption by arguing that if we think through (1) what a rule and (2) what morality is, we will come to see that at least a minimal kind of egalitarianism is a *conceptual necessity* for a group of people who have a morality. (A human society with a morality is probably pleonasm.) This claim seems to me to rest on a confusion. There have been and are societies with moral codes — and thus of course rules of conduct — which are both in practice and in theory thoroughly inegalitarian. They may very well be societies we should disapprove of and wish to see altered. But they exist and indeed some continue to thrive. The kind of ‘uniformity’ that goes with having a rule has little to do with what we mean by ‘equality’ when we speak of ‘social equality’, ‘equality of opportunity’, ‘equality of rights’ and the like. Indeed, as Berlin remarks, “to fall under a rule is *pro tanto* to be assimilated to

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a single case.” (17) All rules, simply in virtue of being rules, “enjoin uniform behaviour in identical cases.” (17) But to call this a type of equality, as Berlin does, is *at best* misleading, for rules which prohibit women from entering unescorted into bars or rules which prohibit Indians from buying alcohol on entering bars are highly inegalitarian and discriminatory. Yet, as rules, they indeed enjoin uniform behaviour in identical cases. But they still are inegalitarian. They plainly strike a blow against equality by almost anyone’s standards. Yet these regulations have the features of all rules that Berlin notes.

It is indeed true that a morality – any morality – will be in *part* a matter of rules, including rules for when lower-order rules should be broken. Within a morality a man cannot, without being unfair, and thus *offending* against the morality in question, “consistently obtain more than other men with the same, or sufficiently similar, relevant characteristics.” (18) But this only indicates that some minimal conception of justice is a constituent feature of anything we would recognize to be a morality. That is, it would be a constituent part of anything that could count as a moral point of view. But this does not show that a morality *must* be committed to a principle of equality. In a highly inegalitarian society, and indeed even a racist and sexist society, a judge could impartially and fairly apply the laws. There could be *justice of a certain sort* in that society *and inequality*. (Whether in the fullest, most adequate sense there could be justice is less clear, but then again the very notion of ‘in the fullest, most adequate sense’ is problematical and is very likely to be essentially contestable.) In a white racist society, for example, which sincerely believed that Indians were incapable of attaining the same level of moral and cultural development as Whites, and thus regarded them as children to be treated benevolently but still as wards of the State, there could still be a certain measure of justice and fair treatment – given such ruling beliefs about men – but still little equality. To say, à la Nietzsche, that there was an equality between peers is still not to say that the society in question was an egalitarian one or that people who defended such a society were defending equality.

V

What then, let me ask again, are we committing ourselves to when we defend social equality and how can we show (or can we show), as Berlin at least sometimes maintains we can, that “equality needs no reason, only inequality does”?

Berlin gives a further characterization of equality which does come closer to what I take it egalitarians are typically concerned

with in arguing for equality. (19) With this additional specification, it becomes even less evident why, or even that, equality requires no justification. Berlin remarks "egalitarianism seems to entail that any rule which includes under it a larger number of persons or a larger number of types of persons shall always be preferred to rules which ensure identical treatment only for a smaller number of types; and a society will not be egalitarian to the degree to which, in the formulation of its rules, or in its system of deciding which rules win in cases of conflict, it is influenced by principles other than those of the intrinsic desirability of identical treatment of the largest possible numbers or classes of persons." (19) However, if egalitarians are committed to that without qualification, it would appear at least that they are committed to an absurdity. Either egalitarianism is not exactly that or egalitarianism is indefensible. That is to say, if that claim is entailed by, or in some other sense follows from, the formula 'Every one is to count for one and only one', then the latter ought not to be our sole ultimate action-guide.

Berlin is quite aware that egalitarianism so formulated has no conceptual necessity about it. That is to say, it doesn't simply follow from what it is to be moral or to take the moral point of view or something of that order. A man could quite consistently reason in accordance with moral dictates and still be an inegalitarian, most particularly if that is the reading we are to give to 'egalitarian'. Moreover, it is certainly at least an *intelligible* moral argument, as Berlin points out himself, to argue that certain hierarchially ordered societies are better societies than thoroughly egalitarian ones, for in them (so the claim goes) human beings can attain greater happiness or a more thorough sense of identity. To realize such values in social life, it could and has been argued, is more valuable than simply to attain an ever greater degree of social, political or economic equality. Such considerations lead us to question the desirability of equality for equality's sake. Such claims, even if mistaken, are not unintelligible, and this should make it evident that it is necessary for the egalitarian, unless he wants to be Quixotic and arbitrary, to provide an argument for the preferability of egalitarianism.

I would add the further and stronger argument that egalitarianism *so formulated* is not just morally contestable, it is plainly mistaken. If the thing to do is to always seek those rules which direct behaviour on the rationale that the largest number of persons or types of persons can be treated identically, this would mean that we should, in deciding what to do, never distinguish between men, women, children, the aged, mental defectives, the physically handicapped, and the

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like. This, for example, would commit an egalitarian to not opposing child labor, for we should, given the conception of egalitarianism presently under discussion, ensure that the largest number of people possible should receive identical treatment. Not allowing children to drop out of school and work on the assembly line would not be treating them in the same way we treat other people. Rather, to act in accordance with the principle that we should seek to afford identical treatment to the largest possible number of persons, we should make no restrictions on child labor. The blind, maimed, senile, decrepit and aged should be allowed to drive no matter how incapable.

Translated into the concrete, *such an* egalitarian principle is clearly absurd. As a matter of fact, it entails consequences that would go against the plain intent of egalitarians, e.g. child labor. But then, aside from making *ad hoc* qualifications, how are we to formulate egalitarianism? Berlin, as Part II of his essay makes evident, is perfectly aware of such difficulties. He claims that the ideal of "complete social equality embodies the wish that every being and everybody should be as similar as possible to everything and everybody else." (22) Berlin goes on to remark, appropriately enough, that he doubts "whether anyone has ever seriously desired to bring such a society into being, or even supposed such a society to be capable of being created." (22) Yet he thinks that egalitarians actually have been committed to something which is a modification of this ideal — taking it as a kind of ideal limit to be approximated. "In the ideal egalitarian society," Berlin remarks, "inequality — and this must mean dissimilarity — would be reduced to a minimum." (22)

It is here where I suspect another false note enters. And it is a note not unique to Berlin, for it is frequently voiced by conservative critics of egalitarianism. *Why should inequality be equated with dissimilarity?* Certainly there will remain physical dissimilarities and no one has ever thought that they are incompatible with a commitment to equality. But why can't there, in an egalitarian society, be psychological differences as well as different preferences and interests attendant on these differences? Why could it not be the case that in an egalitarian society people could have a plethora of different interests? Why should all their needs and the weighting they give to their various needs be the same? A likes to trout fish and not to golf or ride horseback, B likes to ride horseback but not to golf or trout fish, C likes to golf but not trout fish or ride horseback. There is nothing in egalitarianism, as ordinarily understood, which requires, or even takes as ideal, that such differences be obliterated or that we should try to phase them out. Rather, there is a concern that each

person have an equal right to have his interests satisfied — to do his own thing — where this is not incompatible with others doing likewise and there is also the concern about there being structural devices which will ensure that everyone can exercise their rights. But there is no commitment to a grey uniformity. That is the critics' bogeyman. Rather, as Berlin rightly observes himself, what egalitarians sought to change was a disparity in the possession or enjoyment of such rather pervasively desired things "as property, political or social power, status, opportunities for the development of faculties or the obtaining of experiences, social and personal, liberties, and privileges of all kinds." (22) What egalitarians are opposed to are all systems of privilege in which some people are rich and powerful and can do what they want, and others must pay homage and live in servility, or at least in deference, and are not able to do what they want or satisfy a whole range of legitimate desires.

It is here most plainly where people should be equal; it is here where treatment and life conditions should be uniform, but this does not imply that people should be as near to being identical as possible, like the same model Fords on an assembly line. Such a notion is an anti-egalitarian caricature of egalitarianism.

That response to caricatures of egalitarianism is all well and good, but still what is it precisely to be an egalitarian? Like the theologian using the *via negativa*, we seem to be back to a list of inequalities that should be overcome but we still have not adequately positively characterized what state of affairs we are aiming at if we are egalitarians.⁹ We only know that egalitarianism seeks a state of affairs in which everyone's interests has an equal *prima facie* weight and in which everyone can have his interests satisfied where satisfying those interests allows others to do likewise. Still, where there is a conflict of interests there must be some fair adjudication procedure whereby it can be ascertained whose interests are to be satisfied. A central, but surely, as Rawls's work shows, not the sole consideration concerning what would count as a fair adjudication here would be to allow that satisfaction of interests which would, of the alternatives, achieve the widest and fullest and most equally (evenly) distributed satisfaction of interests. (But there are surely potential areas of indecision and perplexity in this formula. For example, and perhaps most obviously, what are we to do when the fullest satisfaction of interests possible is not the most equally distributed satisfaction of interest possible?)

However, this is little better than a vague characterization, perhaps only helpful as a starter. Beyond that, all we seem to have

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clearly before us is that egalitarianism does not urge a state of affairs where all differences are obliterated or overridden or where we take it as either intrinsically desirable or as a focal aim to give an *identical* treatment to the largest possible numbers of persons or classes of persons regardless of any other consideration. That is the standard caricature of egalitarianism.

What then more concretely and specifically are egalitarians aiming at? Berlin's fanatical or pure egalitarian, aiming at total uniformity is a man of straw. But what then beyond the vague characterization we have given is a reasonable egalitarian advocating? Berlin thinks that specifications of what they have been aiming at have all been modifications of this extreme egalitarianism which seeks as its goal a society with "the maximum similarity of a body of all but indiscernible human beings." (25) I have tried to suggest that this is not what egalitarians are committed to or take as a heuristic ideal.

Some egalitarians have argued that the essential equalities to be achieved or protected are "equality of political and juridical rights." (25) This has been the position of liberals, what Charles Frankel approvingly has called the old egalitarianism. Where these egalitarians are also classical liberals, they have argued that there should be no redistributive economic interference by the state or any demand for economic equality or equality in property or power. There is, of course, the counter argument that in such a situation the clever and ambitious — not to mention the unscrupulous and people already in positions of power — will enrich themselves at the expense of others in such a way that existing extensive social inequalities will develop or persist and indeed be deepened.

Liberals of this stripe reply that this is the price we must pay for political liberty and legal equality. Not all equalities are compossible and we must choose in such situations the more valuable equalities. And political and legal equalities — so these liberals say — are of such a strategic value that we cannot rightly extend at their expense equality beyond political and legal equalities. We cannot, they say, if we prize such equality and the liberties that go with them, extend equality into the economic sphere in such a way, it is thought by liberals and conservatives, that there is a conflict between certain norms of an extreme egalitarianism and liberty. You cannot, it is often believed, have both extensive social equality and liberty. By contrast this is taken by the Left to be one of the central ideological myths of capitalism and of its liberal and conservative defenders. People can only rightly and reasonably count for one and none to count for more than one, these defenders of capitalism claim, in

terms of political and legal rights. It is the contention of these liberals that the really basic equalities that we must insure are these political and legal rights — the classic civil liberties. The struggle for equality, such liberals claim, should be principally directed at two things: (1) the protection of these strategic rights and (2) the eradication of inequalities that plainly offend against morality, namely those based on characteristics which the individual cannot alter such as race and ethnic background. Inequalities resulting from these differences should be wiped out, if that can be done without offending against liberty.

The heuristic ideal should be for everyone to start out with equal opportunities. Given that people actually have something reasonably approaching this equality of opportunity as a starting point, the inequalities in power, prestige and wealth that emerge are not inequalities to be deplored. Any attempt, such liberals believe, to have greater social equality would interfere with the initial equality of opportunity for all and would constitute an intolerable limitation on human liberty.

Berlin remarks that whatever the merits of this liberal conception of things, it still would be disingenuous to identify this with a full-fledged egalitarianism. (26) It rules out as morally intolerable certain traditional types of inequality but only certain inequalities, and it is hardly what 'a true egalitarian' — to use Berlin's phrase — wants. After all, nothing is said about the inequalities rooted in class. Such economic stratification is left untouched.

I agree with Berlin's conclusion here but not with his reasoning for it, for Berlin is led to this conclusion, because, by an arbitrary persuasive definition, he identifies a 'true egalitarian' — the radical egalitarian — with someone who (a) has a "mere desire for equality as such" and (b) believes that the more extensive the uniformity, the better. But this, as we have seen, is an absurd position that egalitarians need not be committed to and have not been committed to.¹⁰ We must beware of such definitions of 'true egalitarians' or 'pure egalitarians' and the like. This is particularly true when we keep in mind Berlin's remark at the end of his essay that he is not trying to make historical remarks.

However, we can see that to be committed to such an ideal as the one we have just articulated and which Berlin rightly rejects, is to be committed to something which is in conflict with egalitarianism. But we also need to ask whether, as Berlin puts it, a liberal inegalitarian stance toward the world gives us a more adequate conception of what kind of society is desirable than a more radically egalitarian

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stance. Does it or does it not leave greater scope for liberty? Libertarian socialists (e.g. Bakunin) think that it does not. Conventional liberal wisdom would have it that it does. (Here, as can be seen in the third section of Berlin's essay, he accepts rather unquestioningly the conventional wisdom.)

Like Plamenatz and Rawls, Berlin believes that liberty could flourish even where there were extensive differences in power and wealth.¹¹ But that liberal belief surely requires, to put it minimally, close critical scrutiny. Berlin, no doubt, would second Plamenatz's claim that we could have both an egalitarian free society and an egalitarian but unfree society. It seems to me that the former at least is clearly false. Indeed, it may be a conceptual impossibility. If we conceive of freedom, as Plamenatz and Berlin do, as (a) being able to do what one pleases subject to the constraint that one does not infringe the rights of others and (b) being in control of one's own life, then, where there are extensive inequalities of power and wealth, the freedom of the less wealthy and less powerful must be curtailed because they plainly do not have the wherewithal to control their own lives and to do what they wish to do.¹² The design of the society and its parameters for action and the immediate control of the society are largely set by those who have the power and the wealth.

It is not even clear that there could be an egalitarian society which was not a free society. Certainly a totalitarian society could not be an egalitarian society even if everyone had his dacha, incomes were the same and each person had an equal share of the consumer durables, for the political power and thus the control of the society would be still anything but equal. Presumably what is meant by an 'egalitarian but unfree society' would be exemplified by a simple hunting and gathering society with an extensive kinship system where all kin shared in various liabilities and privileges and where, while there was no state authority, custom and tradition ruled very extensively, fettering the choices and ignoring the individuality of individuals within such social structures. There would be no class or elite which enforced the authority of custom but its force would still be so strong and the sense of alternatives so weak that people in that society, by and large, would do the thing done unquestioningly. If there are such societies they would *perhaps* count as egalitarian but unfree societies.

If there are in reality tokens of this type, they could not occur in modern complex societies where equality arises as a candidate social and moral norm for us. Contemporary industrial societies, bourgeois and non-bourgeois, are bureaucratically organized societies, hier-

archical in structure, with professional and political elites and with a more or less politically passive public. The egalitarian is concerned to ask, in the face of such social realities, where there is no turning back from industrial societies, whether egalitarianism is a coherent and in anyway achievable or even reasonably approximatable ideal. His worry is not that we might get an egalitarian but traditional society such as the one described above. Such traditional societies are just not on the historical agenda. Even more fundamentally, it is not evident that the characterization of an egalitarian but unfree society given in the last paragraph is a coherent characterization of an *egalitarian* society, for the egalitarian is committed to an equal consideration of everyone's interests or needs. ("From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.") But our putatively 'egalitarian but unfree society' in being such a traditional society with such a kinship structure hardly has any conception of the individual counting. It is one's kin or clan affiliation which determines whether or not one is guilty or responsible. The idea that 'Each is to count for one' — that individuals have a distinctive moral space of their own — has not entered, or at least has not entered in any clear and decisive way, into the cultural awareness of such societies. But then there can be no room for the equal consideration of each individual's needs and interests for there is no clear conception of the moral identity and importance of individuals. It begins to look as if egalitarianism could only emerge after the rise, or at least with the rise, of individualism. Bourgeois individualism *now* fetters egalitarianism but egalitarianism could not have arisen without individualism and continues to require a clear sense of the importance of individuals.

Perhaps the above claim is too strong and perhaps there can be egalitarian but unfree societies, but it is far from clear that this is so. They would have to be simple societies and certainly they could not be societies that operated under Marx's egalitarian principle 'From each according to his ability and to each according to his needs', for in such traditional societies there is no call for the concern with the diversity of individual needs that is involved in Marx's principle.

VII

I do not claim here to have found an adequate characterization of what social equality comes to. But I have tried to show some of the things that it is not and to explode some liberal myths that persist about egalitarianism and to gesture in the direction of a more adequate characterization. I think Berlin has powerfully and correctly

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argued that we cannot reasonably take something called the principle of equality – by comparison with the principle of utility or the categorical imperative – as the sole ultimate principle of moral and political appraisal. If that is what it is to be an egalitarian, then no one should be an egalitarian. But questions still remain about what egalitarians are committed to. I examined an important liberal modification of what Berlin regards as radical egalitarianism and argued that as a statement of egalitarianism it did not capture what egalitarians wish to opt for or indeed would reflectively opt for. Whether as a non-egalitarian principle it is (1) adequate or (2) superior to a reasonable form of egalitarianism is something that remains to be ascertained. What is perfectly clear is that it will not do as a form of egalitarianism.

We do know, if my arguments have been near to their mark, that certain forms of egalitarianism are unacceptable, that certain claims propounded (usually by their opponents) as egalitarian are not egalitarian at all and that we have a very general, though vague, egalitarian principle that is reasonable and does catch the direction of egalitarian commitments, namely the principle that everyone is to have his/her interests equally considered and have his/her interests satisfied where this is possible and where satisfying those interests allows others to do likewise. (Essentially the same principle can be

allows others to do likewise. (Essentially the same principle can be reformulated in terms of needs.) This principle is vague and in ways ambiguous and needs both interpretation and specification in the context of a developed social theory, but it does articulate the underlying commitments of an egalitarian and does not commit him to the absurd bogeyman that Berlin, along with many liberals and conservatives, foist on the egalitarian.

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NOTES

- ¹ George Lichtheim, "What Socialism Is and Is Not," *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. XIV, No. 7, (April 9, 1970), pp. 41–45.
- ² Isaiah Berlin, "Equality," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Vol. 56 (1966–7). Reprinted in W.T. Blackstone (ed.), *The Concept of Equality*,

- (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Burgess Publishing Co., 1969), pp. 14–34. References to Berlin will be given in the text and the page references will be from *The Concept of Equality*.
- 3 David Thomson remarks appropriately in his book on equality that “. . . the ideal of equality has nothing to do with uniformity. To recognize that men are equally individual human beings involves no desire or need to treat them uniformly in any ways other than those in which they clearly have a moral claim to be treated alike.” David Thomson, “The Problem of Equality,” *The Concept of Equality*, p. 3.
 - 4 Justus Hartnack, “Moral Rules and Tautologies,” *Philosophical Essays Dedicated to Gunnar Aspelin*, (Lund, Sweden: CWK Gleerup Bokförlag, 1963), pp. 28–9.
 - 5 Isaiah Berlin, *op. cit.*, pp. 14–34.
 - 6 Berlin’s liberalism is situated and some of the relevant critical considerations are aired in Jonathan Liebersohn and Sidney Morgenbesser, “The Choices of Isaiah Berlin,” *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. XXVII, No. 4, (March 20, 1980), pp. 31–36. It is interesting to note how his account of equality clashes with that of another prominent liberal, John Flamenatz. Compare Berlin’s argument on page 27 with Flamenatz’s argument on pages 85–6 both in *The Concept of Equality*.
 - 7 Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 14–48.
 - 8 This rather standard claim is clearly articulated by, among others, R.S. Peters, “Equality and Education,” S.I. Benn and R.S. Peters, “Justice and Equality” and Monroe C. Beardsley, “Equality and Obedience to Law” all reprinted in *The Concept of Equality*. I have criticized such a thesis in my “On Not Needing to Justify Equality,” forthcoming. See also Charles Frankel, “Equality of Opportunity,” *Ethics*, Vol. 81, No. 3 (April, 1971), pp. 191–211 and his “The New Egalitarianism and the Old,” *Commentary* (September, 1973), pp. 54–61.
 - 9 Similar things should be said about Bernard Williams influential essay “The Idea of Equality,” *The Concept of Equality*, pp. 35–53. Robert Nozick has powerfully criticized Williams – a criticism Williams has not responded to in his discussion of Nozick. Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1974) Chapter 8. (Williams’s critique of Nozick occurs in his “The Minimal State,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 17, (January, 1975), pp. 42–7.) I do not generally think, however, that “Nozick’s Critique of Egalitarianism,” *Diotima* (1984). Anthony Skillen’s nappy critique of Nozick on egalitarianism also seems to me well taken. See Anthony Skillen, *Ruling Illusions*, (Hassocks, Sussex: The Harvester Press Ltd., 1977), pp. 48–55;
 - 10 This is clear enough both from Engels classic statement in his *Anti-Dühring* that the equality to be sought is the equality of classlessness and that the demand for a greater equality is senseless and from Marx’s statement in his *Critique of The Gotha Programme* that in advanced stages of communism we are to distribute according to needs, thereby recognizing that

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the distribution would be different as people's needs differed. David Thomson also makes this perfectly clear in his *Equality* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1949). [Note my quotation from Thomson in footnote 3.]

- ¹¹ This comes out most clearly in John Rawls "Distributive Justice" in *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, Third Series, (Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1967), pp. 58–82. C.B. Macpherson aptly pinpoints this in his *Democratic Theory*, (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1973), Essay IV. This acceptance of the legitimacy of economic inequalities is very clear in John Plamenatz "Equality of Opportunity", *The Concept of Equality*, pp. 90–5. I have argued against such a belief in my "Class and Justice" in John Arthur and William H. Shaw (eds.) *Justice and Economic Distribution*, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1978), pp. 225–245, my "Radical Egalitarian Justice: Justice as Equality," *Social Theory and Practice*, Vol. 5, No. 2, (Spring, 1979), pp. 209–226 and my "On the Very Possibility of a Classless Society," *Political Theory*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (1978), pp. 191–208.
- ¹² That we can sharply separate being free and the conditions of freedom, so that one can be free even though one does not have the things that are necessary to exercise that freedom, is powerfully undermined by Norman Daniels in his "Equal Liberty and Unequal Worth of Liberty" in Norman Daniels (ed.) *Reading Rawls* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1975), pp. 253–281.