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## 4

*Does equality destroy liberty?*

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*1 Diversity*

The enemies of equality have regularly attempted to justify their hostility by claiming that the values of equality and liberty are, in practice if not in principle, antithetical. Human beings, it is argued, differ greatly in their skills and abilities. Inevitably, therefore, some will tend to be more successful than others, and this natural tendency towards inequality can be countered only by the authoritarian suppression of individual talents and aspirations. Hume said it all, with admirable brevity, in 1751:

Render possessions ever so equal, men's different degrees of art, care, and industry will immediately break that equality . . . The most rigorous inquisition . . . is requisite to watch every inequality on its first appearance; and the most severe jurisdiction, to punish and redress it . . . So much authority must soon degenerate into tyranny.

(Hume 1751, p. 194)

The thesis has now, apparently, attained the status of official government policy. Here is F. A. Hayek, the intellectual inspiration of our present rulers:

From the fact that people are very different it follows that, if we treat them equally, the result must be inequality in their actual position, and that the only way to place them in an equal position would be to treat them differently . . . The equality before the law which freedom requires leads to material inequality . . . The desire of making people more alike in their condition cannot be accepted in a free society as a justification for further and discriminatory coercion.

(Hayek 1960, p. 87)

Finally let our rulers speak for themselves. Here is Sir Keith Joseph:

That the pursuit of equality has in practice led to inequality and tyranny . . . is not mere accident. It is the direct result of contradictions which are inherent in the very concept of equality. Egalitarians rely for the achievement of their objects on the coercive power of the State, as they

are bound to do by the nature of the human material with which they deal. A society in which the choices fundamental to human existence are determined by coercion is not a free society. It follows irresistibly that egalitarians must choose between liberty and equality.

(Joseph and Sumption 1979, p. 47)

The anti-egalitarian argument has been regularly mounted; it has been as regularly answered.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, as is the way with ideology, it persists despite having been refuted. This may suggest that a further attempt at refutation, such as I am about to undertake, would be a somewhat futile enterprise. But though I accept that the intellectual refutation of ideology can have only a limited effect, it can have *some* good effect. Hence the attempt which follows.

An immediate, and substantially effective, response to the anti-egalitarian argument is to insist on the difference between 'equality' and 'uniformity'.<sup>2</sup> The anti-egalitarian relies heavily on the assumption that equality would require the elimination of all major differences between individuals. Given this assumption, it then seems plausible to maintain that, given the great diversity of people's talents and interests, the required uniformity can be achieved only by a repressive levelling down which prevents such talents from being realised. Some people are, it is said, quite inescapably better than others at playing the violin, at long-distance running, at writing poetry or doing symbolic logic; and these people will inevitably excel, unless they are forcibly prevented from doing so. However, the initial assumption is of course unwarranted. 'Equality' does *not* mean 'uniformity', and an egalitarian society would not be a society in which no one excelled in skilled activities. Rather, it would be a society in which all, in their different ways and with the help of their differing talents, could enjoy an equally worthwhile and satisfying life.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Two useful replies are: Tawney 1964, ch. v, section 2 and Carritt 1967.

<sup>2</sup> The distinction is excellently made in Bruce Landesman's paper 'Egalitarianism revived' (forthcoming). I should like to acknowledge my debt to this paper, from which I have learned a great deal and which has stimulated my own thinking about the problems discussed in the present paper.

<sup>3</sup> The concept of equality as 'equal well-being' which I employ in this paper is taken from Landesman's article cited above. I have also benefited from Nielsen 1979, another valuable discussion of how to formulate this kind of egalitarianism and what its implications are.

This answer, important though it is, will only take us part of the way. The anti-egalitarian is likely to retort that, though differences between people in respect of their talents and achievements may not themselves *constitute* inequalities, they will inevitably tend to *produce* inequalities. The skilled and the talented will be better placed to achieve rewarding lives for themselves. Differences of temperament will have a similar effect. Persons endowed with an energetic disposition, or with an equable temperament, stand to get more out of life than their more sluggish or morose fellows. In short, human capacities for happiness are so multiform that equality in this area can be reached only by massive external intervention in people's lives. 'Equality of well-being' or 'equality of satisfaction' is thus bound to prove an authoritarian ideal.

This case, too, can be answered; but rather than answer it directly, I want at this point to enlarge my ambitions. Liberty and equality, I wish to argue, are not just compatible values, they are interdependent. The ideal of a free society, properly understood, coincides with the ideal of an equal society. And I believe that I can most effectively defend the weaker 'compatibility' thesis by arguing for the stronger 'interdependence' thesis. My defence of the interdependence thesis will involve first examining the concept of liberty, then examining the concept of equality, and thereby revealing the links between them.

## 2 Liberty

It has regularly been recognised that the defence of something like the interdependence thesis tends to appeal to a positive rather than a negative conception of liberty. Accordingly we find the anti-egalitarians frequently insisting on the negative conception, and maintaining that the positive conception of liberty, which is supposed to be more easily linked with equality, is not really a concept of liberty at all, but something else masquerading as liberty. Hayek is a good example of this, and I shall frequently direct my arguments at him in this section. In the first chapter of Hayek's *The constitution of liberty* (1960) we find him saying that though one can indeed use the term 'liberty' or 'freedom' as one wishes, the only sense with which he is

concerned is the negative definition of freedom as absence of coercion by other human beings (*ibid.*, pp. 11f). Freedom so defined presupposes, as he says, 'that the individual has some assured private sphere, that there is some set of circumstances in his environment with which others cannot interfere' (*ibid.*, p. 13). Here we have the classical negative picture of liberty – liberty as absence of interference, the non-intrusion by other human beings into what Mill calls 'a circle around every individual human being', 'a space entrenched around', a 'reserved territory'.<sup>4</sup>

There is of course a long history of debate about negative and positive liberty, to which I cannot possibly do justice here.<sup>5</sup> Since it is, however, essential to my argument that I should appeal to the positive rather than the negative conception of liberty, I shall have to say something about how and why I would want to defend it. I shall do this by first acknowledging certain dangers in the positive view, in order then to distinguish what I take to be valid in it.

Consider, then, a characteristic formulation, which I take from Caudwell (1938). The essay contains much which I shall want to endorse: that people do not become free simply by being left alone, that liberty requires certain positive prerequisites, material and social and intellectual. But now consider the following passage:

Any definition of liberty is humbug that does not mean this: liberty to do what one wants. A people is free whose members have liberty to do what they want – to get the goods they desire and avoid the ills they hate. What do men want? They want to be happy, and not to be starved or despised or deprived of the decencies of life. They want to be secure, and friendly with their fellows, and not conscripted to slaughter and be slaughtered. They want to marry, and beget children, and help, not oppress each other. Who is free who cannot do these things, even if he has a vote, and free speech? Who then is free in bourgeois society, for not a few men but millions are forced by circumstances to be unemployed, and miserable, and despised, and unable to enjoy the decencies of life?  
(Caudwell 1938, p. 225)

In the light of this, Caudwell goes on to claim that:  
as Russia shows, even in the dictatorship of the proletariat, before the

<sup>4</sup> These phrases are all taken from Mill 1848, bk v, ch. xi, section 2.

<sup>5</sup> The classic discussion is Berlin 1969.

classless State has come into being, man is already freer. He can avoid unemployment, and competition with his fellows, and poverty. He can marry and beget children, and achieve the decencies of life. He is not asked to oppress his fellows.  
(*ibid.*, p. 227)

This was written in the thirties, at the height of the Stalinist autocracy – the period of the purges, the show trials, forced labour, forced collectivisation of agriculture and so on. Bearing this in mind, one can see how the assertion that, despite all this, the people of the Soviet Union were freer, because they were better fed and better housed and therefore had what they wanted, is more than enough to give positive liberty a bad name.

What has gone wrong in the Caudwell passage? Notice first the slide from defining freedom as '*doing* what one wants' to defining it as '*getting*' what one wants. From being a feature of human action, freedom comes to be seen instead as a matter of gaining satisfactions. This is then followed by the assumption that the wants whose satisfaction constitutes freedom are simply fixed and given, that their content can be taken for granted and that the only problem is how to satisfy them. There is no suggestion that people might need to *choose* what it is that they want, and how they want it. And this is what I take to be the crucial thing missing from Caudwell's account of freedom: *the exercise of choice*.

In emphasising the centrality of choice to human freedom, we can do justice to the fact stressed by the 'negative liberty' theorists that freedom does indeed require absence of coercion. If human beings are compelled by others to act in certain ways, they are to that extent unable to exercise their own choice of how to act. Therefore, in so far as people are coerced, they are indeed unfree – and we should not forget this, as Caudwell and others are sometimes inclined to do. However, by stressing the positive fact of choice rather than the mere negative fact of non-interference, we can also do justice to the fact that freedom requires more than mere absence of coercion. People are not enabled to exercise their capacity for choice simply by being left alone. Along these lines, then, we shall be able to see why freedom does indeed depend on positive material and social prerequisites. I shall try to show this in a moment, but before doing so I want to look at two objections to the equating of

freedom with the availability of effective choice together with the capacity to exercise it.

The first objection I take from Hayek. He says:

the range of physical possibilities from which a person can choose at a given moment has no direct relevance to freedom. The rock climber on a difficult pitch who sees only one way out to save his life is unquestionably free, though we would hardly say he has any choice . . . Whether [a person] is free or not does not depend on the range of choice.

(Hayek 1960, p. 12f)

Is the case of the rock climber a counter-example to my proposal? Do we really have here a situation where a person has no choice, but is still free? I want to suggest that the kind of choice we are talking about in this example is a *choice of means*, and that when I propose to define freedom in terms of choice, this should be taken as referring to a *choice of ends*. Hence the example can be accommodated. Given that a person is pursuing certain ends, the fact that he has no choice as to the means he can adopt does not make him less free. It would do so only if some of the actual or possible means also had value as ends in themselves. Only in such a case would the fact that he could not pursue his ends in this way rather than that constitute a restriction on his freedom. A limitation on one's choice of means to a given end is not *ipso facto* a limitation on one's freedom. On the other hand, a limitation on one's choice of ends to pursue is a limitation on one's freedom.

A more substantial objection, I think, would be the following. One does not, it might be said, increase a person's freedom simply by increasing the sheer quantity of possibilities which he or she can choose from. Suppose, for example, that I enjoy instant coffee. Suppose that I buy my coffee at a shop which normally stocks two brands of instant coffee. One day I find that the shop has introduced twenty additional brands of instant coffee, all tasting almost the same, 'so as to offer our customers greater freedom of choice'. Here it seems plausible to assert that this merely quantitative increase in the possibilities available has not really increased my freedom. The fact that I now have to choose from twenty-two brands instead of two is simply a drag. It seems to follow, then, that increasing one's range of choice does not necessarily increase one's freedom.

What this example shows, I think, is that we cannot define freedom in purely formal terms. In the example my freedom of choice is not increased, because the additional choices are entirely pointless choices. On the other hand, if there were a total monopoly in coffee, so that only one brand was ever available, or if there were no choice between instant and real coffee, there *would* be less freedom of choice. The conclusion to draw, then, is that the degree of one's freedom depends on the range of *meaningful* or *relevant* choice.

What makes a choice meaningful or relevant? There is no general formal principle to which we can appeal here. In the coffee example, the reason why the choice between real coffee and instant coffee is a relevant choice, but the choice between twenty-two brands is a pointless choice, is that people's tastes in coffee do vary, but not that much. The only way of specifying the range of choice which is necessary for freedom is to say that choice must extend over the normal range of human desires and tastes. In other words, what counts as meaningful freedom is determined by the kinds of things which human beings do as a matter of fact tend to want, and the ways in which they do in fact vary from one another.<sup>6</sup>

This claim gains further support if we think about the standard cases of coercion. What makes a threat coercive? Suppose that I am running a protection racket. I threaten to smash up your betting shop unless you pay protection money. 'Look,' I say, in true Mafia style, 'I'm offering you a choice, what are you complaining about? Either I deprive you of your livelihood, or you pay me the money - it's entirely up to you, you're quite free.' Now obviously what has to be said here is that this is not a real choice. Why not? In reply we can only refer to the importance which people's means of livelihood necessarily have for them. One's means of livelihood is simply not something which one can realistically sacrifice, even though in a sense it is perfectly possible for one to do so. The facts of human nature and the human condition are decisive here and they are, in

<sup>6</sup> My formulation here simplifies what is in fact a very complex issue. Some of the complexities in the relationship between the amount of people's freedom and the range and value of the choices open to them are discussed in G. A. Cohen 1981, especially in the central digression of the paper.

general, what must determine what counts as a realistic or meaningful choice.

Freedom, then, I take to be the availability of, and capacity to exercise, meaningful and effective choice. If this is correct, we can now go on to look at the positive prerequisites of freedom. 'Positive liberty' theorists have regularly linked freedom with the possession of social and institutional powers (such as the political franchise);<sup>7</sup> with material and economic requirements; and with the possession of education and acquisition of knowledge. Power, wealth and education – the relevance of these is not, as the Caudwell passage appears to suggest, that they are things people want, and that in obtaining them they get what they want and are therefore free. The point is rather that they are sources of our capacity to exercise choice. That is to say, they are not just specific *objects* of our choices, they are things that enable us to make choices. To the extent that people have access to social power, material wealth and education, they are in a better position to make choices for themselves and therefore enjoy greater freedom. My formulation here obviously entails that I see freedom as something which admits of degrees. The multiple sources of freedom are such that some may be present and not others. I may enjoy a substantial amount of power and material wealth, and to that extent enjoy a degree of freedom, but this freedom may be limited by my ignorance and irrationality and the narrowness of my mental horizons. Or again, I may have certain kinds of social powers but not others. In all such cases I have some freedom, but could have more.

I shall now look briefly at power, wealth and education in turn. In each case I shall try to show their relevance to freedom by looking at Hayek's arguments for dissociating them from his preferred concept of freedom.

(i) *Social and institutional powers*: Hayek contrasts his own use of the term 'freedom' with another use which is generally recognised as distinct. It is what is commonly called 'political

<sup>7</sup> Hereafter I use the word 'power' to mean *social* power, the power assigned to people by particular social arrangements. This is to be contrasted with the power over nature which takes the form of *technical* mastery of natural processes. In any actual society, of course, the two are closely intertwined, but I cannot in this paper go into the details of the relation between them.

freedom', the participation of men in the choice of their government, in the process of legislation, and in the control of administration. It derives from an application of our concept to groups of men as a whole which gives them a sort of collective liberty. But a free people in this sense is not necessarily a people of free men; nor need one share in this collective freedom to be free as an individual. It can scarcely be contended that the inhabitants of the District of Columbia, or resident aliens in the United States, or persons too young to be entitled to vote do not enjoy full personal liberty because they do not share in political liberty.

(Hayek 1960, p. 13)

There are two confusions here. The first is that Hayek runs together national independence and democratic government. The former is indeed simply the collective analogue of freedom; from the fact that nation A is no longer ruled by nation B, it certainly does not follow that the inhabitants of A are any freer than they were before. Whether they are in fact freer will depend on what kind of political system is then instituted. On the other hand I do want to claim that if a form of democratic politics is then created, the individual members of A *will* have become freer than they were before.

Hayek denies this too. He argues that one may not have the vote, yet still enjoy full personal liberty. Now I certainly agree that one may lack the vote and yet enjoy *some* liberty; in such a situation there are still likely to be some areas of my life over which I do exercise control and in which I act according to my own choices. Therefore one cannot equate liberty *solely* with political power. Nevertheless I also want to say that if I do acquire the power to participate in government or other institutionalised decision-making, I have to that extent *increased* my liberty, I have gained *more* of that freedom which I already to some extent possessed. Previously I exercised *some* control over my life, I had *some* capacity to exercise choices; now, to the extent that I have acquired political power, I have gained *more* of the same kind of freedom, for I have *more* control over my own life, *more* capacity for choice.

It looks otherwise only because Hayek and others regularly focus on that minimal political power which consists in acquiring the right to cast a vote every five years. Certainly gaining that right does not greatly increase my freedom. That, however, is only because it does not greatly increase my political power, and

thus does not greatly increase my capacity for choice. Accordingly the example does not undermine the link between political power and freedom, it merely shows that a very little increase in political power can constitute only a very little increase in freedom. Consider an alternative example where there might be a really substantial increase in people's institutional power. Take the case of an economic enterprise placed under workers' control. Assume that it is a case of their being given genuine collective control over the enterprise, not just a case of window-dressing. This would mean that innumerable aspects of their work which they had previously had to accept as given would now be matters for open choice, matters which could be determined by their own intentions and decisions. I take this to constitute a radical increase in their freedom, and to do so just in so far as it is a radical increase in their institutional power.

(ii) *Economic wealth*: Again I take Hayek as my representative opponent. He says:

This confusion of liberty as power with liberty in its original meaning inevitably leads to the identification of liberty with wealth; and this makes it possible to exploit all the appeal which the word 'liberty' carries in the support for a demand for the redistribution of wealth. Yet, though freedom and wealth are both good things which most of us desire and though we often need both to obtain what we wish, they still remain different. Whether or not I am my own master and can follow my own choice and whether the possibilities from which I must choose are many or few are two entirely different questions. The courtier living in the lap of luxury but at the beck and call of his prince may be much less free than a poor peasant or artisan, less able to live his own life and to choose his own opportunities for usefulness. (*ibid.*, p. 17)

Now if, in this example, the courtier is at the beck and call of his prince, he is indeed to that extent unfree. I am not concerned to identify freedom solely with the possession of economic wealth, and I have allowed that one way in which a person's choices may be limited is through direct coercion by another human being. What we have so far, then, is a comparison between two people who are both unfree, albeit for different reasons. Suppose that we then change the terms of the comparison. Suppose that neither the courtier nor the peasant is at the beck and call of a prince, and that the comparison is simply in respect of the courtier's luxury and the peasant's straitened circumstances. I

then do want to say that the courtier has, to that extent, more freedom. In virtue of his wealth, he has many more possibilities for choice open to him. He has much more opportunity to direct his life in accordance with his own desires and intentions, instead of having the pattern of his life largely dictated to him by the narrow limits of the possibilities open to him.

(iii) *Education and knowledge*: The relevance of these to freedom has often been presented as a matter of their contribution to the *effectiveness* of our choices. The more knowledge and understanding we have, it is said, and the more we are able to think rationally and coherently, the more successful we shall be in controlling our environment and in carrying out our wishes and satisfying our desires. This view is, in turn, attacked as confusing liberty with something like 'effective power'. Hayek, for example, says:

Whether or not a person is able to choose intelligently between alternatives, or to adhere to a resolution he has made, is a problem distinct from whether or not other people will impose their will upon him. (*ibid.*, p. 15)

And again:

It is only too easy to pass from defining liberty as the absence of restraint to defining it as the 'absence of obstacles to the realization of our desires', or even more generally as 'the absence of external impediment'. This is equivalent to interpreting it as effective power to do whatever we want. (*ibid.*, p. 17)

Whatever may be said about this link between understanding and the *effectiveness* of our choices, there is a more fundamental link: between the capacity for rational understanding and the *capacity to make choices at all*. The ability to make choices is not an innate capacity, present in the new-born child. It develops only with the growth of understanding. The new-born child cannot be said to make choices, because it has no awareness of possibilities. Its behaviour is purely a response to immediate stimuli, and only gradually does it become capable of making free choices as it acquires the ability to envisage desirable alternatives which are not immediately at hand and which contrast with the existing state of affairs. This capacity to envisage alternatives is increased enormously by the acquisition

of language. The process is not, however, one which has any natural terminus. As we acquire education and experience, we thereby come to understand our world and are increasingly able to conceive of alternatives to the present situation, and to think rationally about ways of realising alternatives. If that sounds a rather mundane ability, think of Herbert Marcuse's account of 'one-dimensional man' who equates the given world with the only possible world (Marcuse 1964). However exaggerated and incomplete Marcuse's account may be, there can be no doubt about the role which ideology plays in limiting people's awareness of the choices which are objectively open to them. The pushing back of these restraints is the enlargement of freedom.

I am claiming, then, that political and institutional power, economic wealth and the growth of understanding through education and experience, are positive sources of freedom, and that the absence of these is as much an impediment to freedom as is direct coercion. To complete this claim I want finally to consider a general objection to it, which would run as follows. However important these sources of freedom may be, there is a crucial difference between them and the absence of coercion. The difference is that between human and non-human restraints on action. If I am coerced, I am prevented from acting by other human beings. If I lack social power, or wealth or education, it is not other human beings who prevent me acting in certain ways. The difference between the two is fundamental, and the best way of marking it is to reserve the word 'freedom' for only one of the two. Thus Hayek says that 'freedom', in his preferred sense, 'refers solely to a relation of men to other men' (Hayek 1960, p. 12).

Well, there does seem to be *some* kind of difference here, and whether we want the word 'freedom' to straddle the distinction, or be confined to one side of it, may seem at first to be merely a matter for stipulative definition. Suppose, however, that we go on to ask why this difference should be so important. It is likely to be said that if restraints are imposed by human beings, then human action can remove them, whereas if they are not so imposed, they cannot be removed in that way. But is it so simple? There are surely impediments to freedom, other than direct coercion, which can be removed or altered by human

action, and the ones which we are considering – lack of social power, or wealth or education – all fall into that category. The distribution of each of these things can be changed by human action.

As an illustration of how the distinction begins to shift, consider Isaiah Berlin's treatment of it. He begins with what looks like a firm demarcation:

Coercion implies the deliberate interference of other human beings with the area in which I could otherwise act. You lack political liberty or freedom only if you are prevented from attaining a goal by human beings. (Berlin 1969, p. 122)

There we have the same tight restriction on the use of the word 'freedom' which we find with Hayek. But Berlin continues:

If my poverty were a kind of disease, which prevented me from buying bread, or paying for a journey round the world, or getting my case heard [in the law courts], as lameness prevents me from running, this inability would not naturally be described as a lack of freedom, least of all political freedom. It is only because I believe that my inability to get a given thing is due to the fact that other human beings have made arrangements whereby I am, whereas others are not, prevented from having enough money with which to pay for it, that I think myself a victim of coercion or slavery . . . The criterion of oppression is the part that I believe to be played by other human beings, directly or indirectly, with or without the intention of doing so, in frustrating my wishes. (ibid.)

This is a much looser claim. Berlin is not now saying that I am unfree only if I am directly and deliberately coerced by others. He is saying that I am unfree if my choices are limited by social arrangements attributable to, or alterable by, human agency. And once one makes this concession (as I think Berlin is right to do), a great deal more has to be admitted. Even his example of lameness becomes contentious. Whether my lameness can be cured, and how drastically it will inhibit my activities, will depend very much on the adequacy of the health care facilities available to me in my society, and that is something which is determined by human agency. Thus the dividing line between natural and human impediments leaves a great deal more on the

human side of the line than might at first appear. Certainly the things which I have been stressing – access to social power, to economic wealth and to education – come under the heading of social arrangements made by human beings.

I do not think, then, that the confining of 'freedom' to 'absence of coercion' can be justified by arguing that the latter alone is achievable by human agency. To this I would add a positive argument for extending the concept of 'freedom' in the way in which I have been trying to do, and this positive argument is simply an appeal to experience. The appeal to experience tends to be deployed by the critics of 'positive liberty'. They are inclined to say that however much an authoritarian regime may claim that its subjects are better fed or better educated, passing this off as 'freedom' is a sleight of hand which will deceive no one; its subjects know that what they are experiencing, however valuable it may be, is not freedom.

I want to suggest that the test of experience can take us the other way. Of course feeling well-fed is not the same as feeling free. Think however of what an increase in economic well-being may bring with it. Think of someone who unexpectedly inherits a fortune, and becomes aware of entirely new ways of life which are now available. Or in the case of social power, think of the experience of the oppressed who rebel against their intolerable condition, find all resistance crumble and discover that power has fallen into their hands. Or in the case of education, think of someone who, in middle age and after living within fairly limited horizons, decides to go to college and thereby discovers the possibility of entirely new attitudes to life, the possibility of questioning innumerable things which he or she had previously taken for granted. In all these cases I think one can speak quite appropriately of a sense of liberation. By this I mean an awareness of an array of choices which were hitherto quite unavailable or unrecognised. I mean a heady sense of new vistas opening up. I mean the characteristic combination of an exhilarating sense of new possibilities and an awesome feeling of new responsibilities. All of this, experientially, is of a piece with the removal of coercion, as for example in the case of release from prison. The acquisition of power, of wealth and of education *are* experienced as liberation.

### 3 Equality

I turn now to the connection with equality. I said earlier that the egalitarian is concerned not to make everyone alike, but that everyone should have an equally worthwhile and satisfying life. I noted, however, the objection that individual idiosyncrasies, the variety of individual abilities and temperaments would make this very difficult to achieve, and would in practice, even if not in principle, require massive regimentation of people's lives. I now want to propose that though this ideal of 'equal well-being' may be the underlying ethical principle of egalitarianism, it is not what egalitarians have in practice directly aimed at. Rather, they have aimed at creating the *social conditions* which would *enable* people to enjoy equally worthwhile lives. There can be no guarantee that everyone will in fact achieve equal well-being, and indeed the expectation must be that this will never entirely happen, but what we can do is create the kind of society in which there will be no impediments to equal well-being, other than the accidents and vagaries of individual temperaments and inclinations.

What then are these social conditions which egalitarians have in practice been concerned to create? I want to suggest that egalitarians have been concerned above all with the three factors which I have just been discussing: social power, wealth and education. We thus come to the crux of my argument. Egalitarians have in practice aimed at equality of social power, equality of wealth and equality in education – and in the light of the previous section I can then claim that, in these various ways, what egalitarians are aiming at is equality of liberty.

As in the previous section, I shall deal briefly with each of the three factors in turn, and sketch their relevance to equality.

(i) *Equality of social power*: It is an obvious feature of egalitarian writing that it has been concerned not with unequal relations between mere individuals as such, not with the random fact that this person and that person happen to be unequal in some respect, but with unequal relations between social groups. Inequalities between rich and poor, between ruling class and oppressed class, between men and women, between white and black – these are the constant theme. The concern is therefore with the *structural* features of a society, with institutionalised or



semi-institutionalised social relations. By 'institutionalised' relations I mean relations embodied in explicit formal rules; by 'semi-institutionalised' I mean those depending on habitualised implicit assumptions which, in conjunction with institutionalised rules, govern the relations between groups. An example of the first would be racial inequality in the South African system of apartheid. An example of the second would be racialism in the United States of the kind which the civil rights movement set out to eliminate. This was not, on the whole, embodied in formal rules securing powers and privileges for whites, it was more a matter of the informal monopolisation of power by whites, grounded in attitudes and prejudices. Notice however that such cases are not *simply* a matter of prejudice. Prejudice creates inequalities only when it is superimposed on relations which *are* institutionalised – on institutions of political power, professional hierarchies, etc.

As an example of egalitarianism which focuses on power relations between social groups, consider the case of Marxism. Marxism has often been thought of as a major instance of egalitarian theory.<sup>8</sup> In fact, however, the classical Marxist writers very rarely invoke the idea of equality, and when they do, their typical attitude is that epitomised by Engels: '... the real content of the proletarian demand for equality is the demand for the *abolition of classes*. Any demand for equality which goes beyond that, of necessity passes into absurdity' (Engels 1969, p. 128). Engels's position seems to me to be too narrow (although he is sensitive to other kinds of inequality e.g. between men and women: *The origin of the family, private property and the state*). Class inequality is not the only kind of inequality. As I have already indicated, such things as sexual inequality and racial inequality are distinct from class inequality, and independently important.<sup>9</sup> That is not to imply that they are insulated from one

<sup>8</sup> We have it on no less an authority than that of Sir Keith Joseph that Marxism 'is the only internally coherent egalitarian philosophy': Joseph and Sumption 1979, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> In fairness to Engels I should acknowledge that in the passage which I have quoted he regards the abolition of classes as 'the real content' of 'the proletarian demand for equality'. This is consistent with the view that the demand for equality, when made by other oppressed groups, can properly have a different real content.

another. In recent years Marxists, socialist feminists and others have rightly been concerned with the ways in which these different structures of inequality interact and reinforce each other. But what I mean is this. Socialism, as I understand it, is a movement to destroy class oppression *because it is oppression*. The ethical impulse of socialism is an appeal to a *general* ethics of equality. On that same ethical basis, sexual oppression and racial oppression stand condemned in their own right, because they too are inequalities. Marxists have sometimes given the impression that the only thing wrong with racism is that it divides the working class and so perpetuates class oppression. It does do that, but that is not the only thing wrong with it.

It is, then, a mistake to confine the legitimate application of the concept of equality to the struggle for a classless society. What I do want to agree with, however, is the emphasis on inequality of structural power relations. In the case of class inequality, these power relations are the relations of production. They are ownership relations, the relations which separate the class which owns the means of production and the class which, within the sphere of production, owns only its labour-power. These relations of production give the one class a pervasive power over the other, not just in economic life, but in the making of decisions about the life of the society as a whole. In contrast, socialist, egalitarian relations of production would consist in the common ownership and popular control of the means of production. These would give working people power over their own lives, and especially over their working lives. They would constitute a society in which all would share equally in the making of decisions and choices about the organisation and direction of economic activity, in place of a society in which most people have these choices and decisions made for them. They would, to that extent, constitute the equalisation of freedom, and so would any other social relations which equalised power between different groups.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> It might be thought that the phrase 'equality of power' is something of a misnomer, on the grounds that genuinely equal relations between people would do away with power altogether. Certainly the phrase is misleading if it suggests a picture of power as a commodity which can simply be distributed in different proportions, and which retains the same character however it is distributed.

(ii) *Equality of wealth*: It is a difficult question whether inequality of wealth is ultimately reducible to inequality of power. It may help if we distinguish between wealth as means of *production* and wealth as means of *consumption*. If we are talking about the former, that is, about the ownership of wealth as capital, then we *are* talking about inequality of power in the sphere of production. If we then turn to consider wealth under the aspect of consumption, it is in the first place clear that inequalities in consumer wealth follow directly from inequalities in the relations of production. Those who enjoy the greatest material benefits do so because they exercise control over the means of production. Nevertheless we can envisage the possibility of unequal wealth *not* stemming from unequal power. We can, for example, envisage the possibility of a socialist economy with egalitarian relations of production in which, by common agreement, some are given much greater material rewards than others. We might imagine this being agreed to as a consequence of a residual exaggerated respect for certain kinds of human qualities, for example mental rather than manual skills. In this situation, then, equality of power would co-exist with inequality of wealth.

Thoroughgoing egalitarians would, I think, rightly regard this inequality of wealth as objectionable. They would, moreover, see it as important for the reasons I have already indicated. Such inequalities of wealth would make it more difficult for some than for others to enjoy a worthwhile life. Conversely, though individual differences between people make it unpractical and undesirable to try to guarantee that everyone lives an equally worthwhile life, equality of wealth would put everyone equally in a position to live such a life, while leaving them free to utilise the opportunities in whatever ways they see fit.

Equal relations would differ not just quantitatively but qualitatively from relations in which one group or person had power over another. The attempt to create equal relations between men and women, for example, would be an attempt to create relations no longer characterised by domination and submission. Nevertheless, in hanging on to the idea that these equal relations would still be 'power relations', we can mark the fact that any social relations other than the most transitory have to incorporate at least a semi-formalised recognition of how decisions are to be made and who is to make them. (On this point I am grateful for discussions with Vic Seidler and Tony Skillen among others.)

I have deliberately been leaving open the question whether 'wealth' is to be understood as meaning 'money' or 'material goods'. There is a strand in socialist thought which seems to envisage the eventual abolition of money. This might seem to be encouraged by a passage in the 'Critique of the Gotha programme' where Marx suggests that true equality would be attainable only when there had been achieved an economic condition of sheer abundance (Marx and Engels 1962, p. 24).<sup>11</sup> I would accept that economic equality cannot mean *simply* equality of *monetary* wealth. As is stressed in the Marx passage, needs differ. An obvious case would be that of health care. A person suffering from a serious physical disability needs much greater health care than a fit and healthy person. Consequently, if they are equal simply in respect of monetary income, and if the first person has to spend the greater part of his resources on expensive medical treatment, the upshot will be very great inequality in their overall condition. Such examples suggest that an appropriate egalitarian principle would be one of free provision for basic needs. As well as health care these basic needs might include, say, housing, basic foodstuffs and education. I cannot however imagine that *all* needs and desires could be met on this principle of free provision. Marx's vision of total abundance smacks too much of nineteenth-century optimism. There are inescapable limits to what can be produced, there must be inescapable decisions about using limited resources for this purpose rather than that, and therefore in any society there will be relative scarcity in at least some respects. One cannot realistically imagine a situation where people, whether individually or collectively, simply go and help themselves to a rare wine or an artistic masterpiece or an exquisitely carved piece of furniture whenever they feel like it.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly it seems to me

<sup>11</sup> For further references, see Moore 1980. Moore's book is very relevant to the present discussion. He argues that what Marx calls the 'higher phase of communist society', involving the abolition of money and exchange, is never shown by him to be either feasible or desirable, and that it is in fact incompatible with his historical materialism.

<sup>12</sup> It may be objected that I am here assuming the persistence of an individualistic consumer mentality, and ignoring the changes in human desires and attitudes which Marx relies on. (Keith Graham has put this point to me.) I am sure that Marx does presuppose a transformation of human consciousness,

that the feasible alternatives are either that the inevitably limited supply of material goods is shared out between people in predetermined proportions, which would leave very little scope for personal choice, or that there is some kind of monetary system which allows people to choose their material goods in accordance with personal preference. I am here accepting the view, sometimes erroneously thought to be an anti-socialist one, that the existence of money is in practice a necessary condition of effective freedom, and that money would continue to play an important role in an economy which respected the requirements of freedom and equality. A comprehensive egalitarian principle might therefore look something like this: satisfaction of the basic needs of all, plus equality of monetary incomes over and above that (though this might need further qualifying if it were desired to increase some incomes to compensate for particularly unpleasant or dangerous work).

The retention of money may seem incompatible with socialism in so far as the latter involves the abolition of an economy dominated by the commodity form. I do not think that it is. Changing economic production so that it is no longer dominated by the commodity form does not require that one should eliminate money, and commodities, as such. Rather, it is a matter of subordinating exchange to use instead of vice versa. It is possible to produce for need instead of for profit, while still retaining some kind of market system for the distribution of some goods.

(iii) *Equality in education*: Egalitarians have always been much preoccupied with education. It is important to see what the proper reasons for this would be. A slogan often appealed to in this area is 'equality of opportunity'. It has been pointed out that this slogan, as it is applied to education, may quickly cease to be at all egalitarian. If it is applied against the background of a competitive and hierarchical system, it means simply that every-

and to some extent I think that he is right to do so. But, however strong the obsession with individual ownership of consumer goods may be in our own society I think it would be a mistake to suppose that problems of the distribution of goods would simply disappear in a different kind of society; it seems prudent to assume that resources will continue to be limited relative to people's wants, and to take seriously the questions of distribution which then arise.

one has the opportunity to compete, according to his or her ability, for educational rewards and for the economic rewards which may come in their wake. In other words, it means equal opportunity to be unequal.

The proper conclusion to draw from this is not that the principle of equal opportunity is useless, but that it is useless until we answer the question: 'opportunity to do what?' If it means 'opportunity to compete in a hierarchical system', then it is not a substantially egalitarian principle. The genuinely egalitarian use of it, however, would mean 'equal opportunity to live a worthwhile life'. In other words, it would mark precisely that qualification which has, in practice, to be added to the idea of equal well-being. As I have suggested previously, one cannot guarantee that everyone has an equally worthwhile life, but one can arrange social conditions so that everyone has an equal *opportunity* to live a worthwhile life. It is this interpretation of equality, I have been arguing, which amounts to equality of liberty.

Thus understood, equality of opportunity would require the equality of social power and the equality of wealth which I have been discussing. The relevance of education is that it too would be one of the most important *opportunities* – one of the most crucial things possession of which, like possession of social power and of wealth, enables people to live worthwhile lives in accordance with their own choices and preferences. Equal educational opportunity now comes to mean not equal opportunity to compete for education, but equal provision of the kind of education which gives everyone the opportunity to live a worthwhile life. There is no room here to discuss at length what this would mean in practice. Clearly, however, it would require that educational resources should not be concentrated on those with certain particular intellectual skills, but spread evenly among all the different kinds of education which people need, and among all those who need them.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> For an indication of the sort of approach I have in mind, see Williams 1965, pt two, ch. 1.

As in the case of wealth, 'equality' in educational resources would have to recognise differences in people's needs. It might require that some people (suffering perhaps from particular physical or mental handicaps) be given special provision in the light of their special or greater needs.

I should add that equality in the provision of education cannot by itself secure equality of opportunity to live a worthwhile life.<sup>14</sup> It cannot possibly do so in a society where there are great inequalities of power and wealth. It is nevertheless important in its own right. It is important especially because, as I argued earlier, education is one of the crucial preconditions enabling people freely to choose for themselves how they are to live.

I have discussed equality of power, equality of wealth and equality of educational provision. There remains one other kind of equality to which egalitarians are commonly thought to be committed: equality of prestige.<sup>15</sup> Of this I would simply say that if we can obtain the other kinds of equality, egalitarians should be quite content to accept inequalities of prestige. Anti-egalitarians are right in this, that a society in which no one ever excelled, in which no one was ever especially looked up to or admired, in which no one ever stood out as an exceptionally accomplished poet or musician or athlete or thinker, would be an intolerable society. On the other hand, it is not clear to me that egalitarians have ever thought otherwise.<sup>16</sup> Prestige is objectionable, and has been objected to, only when it carries power or wealth with it, or accompanies power or wealth.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> That it can do so is the sort of claim which tended to be made by some of the more optimistic advocates of comprehensive schooling twenty or so years ago.

<sup>15</sup> Lucas attributes to egalitarians a preoccupation with inequalities of power, prestige and wealth.

<sup>16</sup> Rousseau, in his *Discourse on the origin of inequality*, describes moral or political inequality as consisting of 'the different privileges which some men enjoy to the prejudice of others; such as that of being more rich, more honoured, more powerful, or even in a position to exact obedience': Rousseau 1973, p. 44; cf. also p. 100. This may seem to give the same weight to inequalities of prestige as to those of wealth and power. It is however an open question how important he took inequality of prestige to be. He describes it as emerging in the early stages of human society, when: 'Each one began to consider the rest, and to wish to be considered in turn; and thus a value came to be attached to public esteem. Whoever sang or danced best, whoever was the handsomest, the strongest, the most dexterous, or the most eloquent, came to be of most consideration; and this was the first step towards inequality, and at the same time towards vice' (p. 81). My own reading of Rousseau would be that this 'first step towards inequality' does not become entrenched as social inequality in the full sense until private property has come into being. (On this point I disagree with, but have learnt much from, my colleague Chris Cherry.)

<sup>17</sup> This may be too simple. Differences in prestige may consist not just in some people being admired more than others, but in some people's self-esteem being

#### 4 A free society

I have argued that power, wealth and education are basic sources of liberty; that the most important equalities to which egalitarians are committed are equality of power, of wealth and of educational provision; and that to that extent they are concerned to equalise liberties. If the argument is correct, does it establish the interdependence of liberty and equality? It might be objected that even if it shows that egalitarians are committed to equalising liberty, that is not enough; for in *equalising* liberty, they might also *diminish* liberty. Thus a society in which there were equality of liberty might still not be 'a free society'. The question is: what could this mean? I shall consider three possibilities.

(i) Our objector might invoke the traditional liberal picture, of a circle around each individual, circumscribing a sacred territory which must not be violated. It might be said that we equalise power, wealth and education only at the cost of making this territory too small, or too often invaded. I have already said something about the inadequacy of this picture. Human beings do not become free simply by being left alone, and the individualism which the picture encourages may be just what stops people from combining to acquire power over their own lives. Again, there are familiar problems about how one could possibly determine where this supposed line is to be drawn; Mill's proposal, that it should be drawn between self-regarding and other-regarding actions, notoriously fails to do justice to the social character of all human actions. We might ask, too, what is supposed to be the source of this external interference in the lives of individuals. The standard answer is: government, the state. But if we are envisaging equal distribution of power, this will mean that political power is no longer monopolised by institutions standing over against individuals; the external source of interference disappears.

fundamentally threatened. The prevailing customs of a society may, for instance, require that certain groups constantly humiliate themselves in relation to others. I am inclined to think that in any actual society such practices would accompany inequalities of power and wealth, as ideological means of sustaining and legitimising those inequalities. Nevertheless the one could conceivably exist without the other, and would then constitute a separate problem.

What does remain a real possibility is that, as the collective holders of shared power, people might impose excessively on certain of their own number, considered as the holders of individual aims and aspirations. In other words, something like Mill's 'tyranny of the majority' would still be possible, and in this respect the equalities we have been considering would *in principle* be compatible with excessive coercion. Whether those equalities would *in practice* be likely to increase coercion is another matter. What seems much more plausible is the traditional democratic claim that equality of power is a better safeguard than inequality of power against excessive coercion.

(ii) It might be said that in creating the equalities we have been considering, one would be decreasing the liberty of *some* people, namely those who formerly possessed a greater share of powers and privileges. This of course is true. In equalising liberty, you increase the liberty of some only by decreasing the liberty of others. There may be some sense in which greater equality increases the freedom of all. Such a case could, I think, be argued.<sup>18</sup> But there remain other and more obvious senses in which equality diminishes some people's freedom.

I do not think, however, that this is a fact to which anti-egalitarians such as Hayek and his followers could readily appeal. However prepared they may be to assert the inescapability of elites, and to defend the economic and cultural privileges of elites, they certainly do not want to treat freedom as an elite privilege. They see themselves as defending not the freedom of certain groups, but 'a free society'. They cannot, therefore, claim that this 'free society' is threatened when the freedom of only a privileged section is diminished. So the question remains what sense can be given to this idea of a free society other than as meaning a society of *equal* freedom.

(iii) One other possibility would be to appeal to something like Rawls's 'Difference Principle' in the matter of freedom

<sup>18</sup> The most plausible version of such a thesis would, I think, be the Marxist claim that only when economic processes are brought under collectively shared human control do they cease to be alien forces dominating human beings, and become subject to human choices. When some people dominate others in the 'free' market, all are dominated by the market. See Marx and Engels 1970; pp. 54-5 and 83-6; Engels, *Socialism Utopian and scientific in Marx and Engels* 1962, p. 153; Caudwell 1938, pp. 223-5.

(Rawls 1972). It could be argued that departures from the equalities we have been considering would produce a freer society because they would increase the freedom even of the least free; and that they would do so because inequalities of power, wealth and educational resources would produce, even for the least advantaged, *more* power, wealth and educational resources.

Could this plausibly be maintained? Certainly not in the case of power, which I have been presenting as the most fundamental equality. Power, at any rate in the sense in which I have been considering it, is essentially a relation between persons. If some people have more power than others, they necessarily have it at the *expense* of others, because it is power *over* those others. Therefore it would be contradictory to suppose that by distributing power unequally we could increase the power of the least powerful.

However, an analogous argument could be and has been maintained in the case of wealth. It is claimed that if we accord greater power to an elite, if we lavish educational resources upon them in their youth, and ply them with economic incentives when they have been educated, their technocratic skills will produce an abundance of wealth for even the least privileged of us. In increasing the wealth available for all of us, they would also be increasing the resources which could be devoted to the education of all of us. Therefore, accepting my claim that wealth and educational resources are essential components of freedom, it could in this way be argued that such inequalities would increase the freedom even of the least advantaged.

This thesis is indeed a possible one. That is to say it is not philosophically incoherent. But if we consult experience, there is no reason to think that it is true. It has a limited truth, perhaps, within a certain kind of society. Given the motivational structures which a capitalist economy fosters and sustains, it may be true that the functioning of such an economy requires hierarchical structures and incentives. This however is only a statement about the inevitable character of capitalism. It does not follow that any human society can achieve material prosperity only by offering radically unequal rewards. In view of the demoralising effects of inequality, the general level of wealth is much more

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likely to be maximised through the energies and commitments which would be promoted by equal sharing in a common enterprise.

I have considered three respects in which it might be maintained that a more equal society would be a less free society. I have suggested that none of the three claims is convincing. It is more plausible to suppose that a free society would be one in which liberty is equally shared by all. I conclude that the struggle for equality is not just compatible with, but coincides with, the struggle for a free society.<sup>19</sup>

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