

ON EQUALITY AND LIBERTY AS ULTIMATE ENDS

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Of late, I have repeatedly claimed that the Left's core goal is to achieve a utopia where all people have complete equality combined with wholly unfettered liberty. This has occasioned numerous queries (especially when one book review was linked on Reddit), asking, in effect, whether this is not internally contradictory. That is, if liberty is unlimited, is it not the case that inequality, rather than equality, is the inevitable result, so that it is false that the Left simultaneously pursues both goals?

Now, I have no intention of offering a complete analysis of liberty and equality, replacing all previous thought on the matter. While I am presumptuous on a regular basis, that takes more chutzpah than I have on hand today. Alexis de Tocqueville can rest easy. But I feel obliged to respond to the question, since it has been asked repeatedly by not-dumb people (I don't waste my time answering questions from dumb people). Also, to be honest, when making the claim I have sensed myself glossing over this underlying question, so intellectual honesty demands I address it. My focus here, therefore, is limited to equality and liberty as those terms are actually used by the modern Left, not on philosophical abstractions.

You have to define terms, of course—or, in this case, define those terms as they are used by others. “Equality,” in the terms of the Left, in essence means that (a) many people and groups are oppressed by other people and groups, both currently and historically and that (b) those oppressions result in differential, inferior outcomes for the oppressed, the elimination of which is “equality.” While some make a distinction between an equality of outcome and an equality of opportunity, the Left rejects this as a false dichotomy, holding instead that inequality of outcome is merely proof positive of oppression, rather than a result of lack of opportunity, so the only possible goal is equality of outcome made possible and enforced by ending the supposed oppression.

Turning to “liberty,” the term definitely does not mean freedom from government coercion or the right to engage in political activity. Instead, for the Left it means, as Roger Scruton most ably outlines, atomism—freedom from nearly any constraint, and in particular from the constraints that constitute “the shared system of norms and values at

the heart of Western society," from any authority outside the individual himself. The only constraints to be left are the ever mounting constraints on any person who would defend or maintain those norms and values; those are to be crushed by increasingly brutal laws and social action directed only at them. Both these goals are to be achieved "by a comprehensive rearrangement of society. . . ." Thus, liberty means only the liberty to choose atomization. Anything else is, in the eyes of the Left, false liberty, which must be crushed, for it digs craters in the smooth road to Utopia, leads innocents astray, and undercuts self-actualization. For current purposes, I am leaving aside whether it is true that this Utopia leads to happiness, or instead leads to self-hatred and societal self-destruction. I merely point out that for the Left nothing can be allowed to stand in the way of this unfettered, atomized liberty; thus the Left's approach to liberty is characterized, famously, by Ryszard Legutko as "coercion to freedom," which bears exact parallels to Václav Havel's analysis of creeping totalitarianism. This results in government using an ever-heavier hand against those perceived as daring to contradict, by belief or action, the demand for ever more freedom of action, especially by those believed to have been earlier oppressed—which provides a philosophical link circling back to the Left's definition of equality.

With these two concepts, equality and liberty, as the two main pillars, the central program of the Left is, as they will be only too happy to tell you, "emancipation," often given a populist flavor by using the term "social justice." By this they mean not only relief from oppression and therefore resultant equality, but even more relief from any unchosen ties that bind. Again, whether emancipation is necessary or desirable is a different question; I am just pointing out what they claim. Thus, emancipation is a means to both equality and liberty. (I think that the only worthwhile emancipation, past, present, and future, is that of African Americans; all other "emancipations" are some combination of unnecessary, undeserved, and pernicious.) Yes, if you squint hard enough, equality and liberty as defined by the Left are not actually wholly compatible; differences of talent, if used to achieve, can lead to inequality of outcomes, which implies that someone must be oppressed, somewhere. The Left never addresses this conflict. This is deliberate, because doing so is unnecessary and hurtful to their overall goals. Scruton deftly analyzes this, showing that the Left always obscures

this conflict between their definitions of equality and liberty, simply “by declaring war on traditional hierarchies and institutions in the name of its two ideals. . . . Moreover, ‘social justice’ is a goal so overwhelmingly important, so unquestionably superior to the established interests that stand against it, as to purify every action done in its name.” If you accept this claim, there is still a theoretical conflict between the logical extension of equality and liberty, but no conflict in practice, since the target of direct action is the same in either case. Perhaps, the Left says, someday when we are eating peeled grapes in the Utopia of complete emancipation, we can find a way to reconcile the theoretical problem, but for now, it doesn’t really matter, because we are out to crush all norms and traditions, for the sake of increasing both liberty and equality. Bring up the guillotine!

The response of some people to this is, doubtless, some version of “Didn’t John Rawls say. . . .?” or “Didn’t Ronald Dworkin say. . . .?” That is, didn’t those pinheads address this question, and resolve the supposed conflict? I don’t care what Rawls or Dworkin said. Both of them are liars and fools, as are all their ilk, and everything I have ever read from either is abysmally stupid and transparently designed merely to justify wholesale the pernicious premises of the Left. The reality is that despite whatever contorted philosophical justifications, usually based on begging the relevant questions, can be conjured up, what I describe above is how the Left views the world, and facing this challenge, and breaking it, is the order of the new century, and preferably of the upcoming decade.

Still, I’d like to explore this a bit more, from the conservative perspective, or, more accurately, from the reactionary perspective. Most conservatives would say that equality is fine, as long as it is equality of opportunity. At the same time, most would suggest that society has some obligation to “level the playing field.” The limits of that are, of course, opaque. Should a child far less intelligent than another be given intensive extra education such that he can better compete with the more intelligent child? Should children from families without both a mother and father, who certainly on average do much worse in life than children with a single parent, be given intensive support to make up the difference? Of course, with welfare programs in the West successfully preventing children selling matchboxes on the street from freezing to death, we already generally accept some leveling of the playing

field, but the question is to what degree this should be done—and in a world of scarce resources and trade-offs, including that we cannot fully enhance the abilities of the most talented if we spend the money on enhancing the abilities of the less talented, the answer has to be that choices must be made. Merely reciting how we need to give everyone equal opportunity is facile.

I have a more important question, though, which is whether beyond the basics of life we should even want equality of opportunity in general, and if so, at what cost. First, let's stipulate that conservatives are in favor of retaining many or all unchosen bonds, the same ones that the Left wants to emancipate everyone from. (This is not true of all conservatives, but let's ignore that for now.) But doesn't allowing unchosen bonds mean that there cannot be equal opportunity? If we ban abortion, so that women cannot escape from the consequences of their actions by killing their children, that means women will have less opportunity, all else being equal. If we encourage a society where, more broadly, people behave similar to the Amish, believing that they are responsible for, and have obligations to, their entire extended family or grouping, blood or otherwise, that means less opportunity. And so on, and on. Second, and totally separate, the most efficient means to enforce equal opportunity, and thus the one often chosen in practice, is to enforce mediocrity. We see this in today's public education system (it is much of the meaning of "diversity and inclusion"), and in the characteristics of certain defective societies, such as Australia's "tall poppy syndrome" or the Danish "Jante Law." Thus, in practice, excessive creation of equal opportunity is a synonym for either shattering necessary bonds in society, or societal stagnation, or both. This implies that refusing to create equal opportunity may be better for society.

Perhaps a structure where people succeed based on their talents and luck, with luck including who your parents are and thus what class you're born into, makes the most sense. Most people probably recoil from that, instead saying they want a meritocracy, which implies that unearned advantages, at least those such as rich or connected parents, should not give people a leg up. (Naturally, contained within this question are fraught matters like "white privilege," though here I mostly mean economic advantages from one's parents.) Maybe, but maybe the opposite is true. Maybe not creating a level playing field is better,

because a non-level playing field, where advantages can be concentrated in families and social classes, tends to create a natural hereditary aristocracy, a ruling class. Certainly we can't do worse than the ruling class we have now, and replacing it with a hereditary one would probably make our society better off. Maybe there's nothing wrong with the rich getting richer—other than that today's rich are, largely, an awful class, so we'd have to erase their wealth and turn them into coal miners, before restarting a program to create a new, virtuous, ruling class. We'd need some opportunity, of course—you can't have too rigid a system (that would prevent me from rising, heaven forbid, since my parents were neither rich nor connected). But too much enforced opportunity is probably as bad, or worse, than too little.

And as for liberty in the conservative viewpoint, most conservatives, at least those in the American or Enlightenment tradition, agree that liberty is good. It's just like apple pie, good for us and totally American! Give me liberty or give me death, and all. But that means political liberty, a different concept, even to the French revolutionaries of 1793, than today's conception of liberty, on the Left but also on the Right. Conservatives therefore divide on whether atomized liberty is good, and to what degree. Some deny that liberty in the sense of self-actualization and release from unchosen constraints is good at all, and say we should return to the older definition of liberty as ordered liberty, guided and constrained by virtue, with the liberty meaning not so much free choice of action as freedom from slavery to passions. Others, from libertarians to conservatives who are really people of the Left, like neoconservatives and most #NeverTrumpers, buy into atomized liberty, and are just interested in adding a little drag to the ship of fools on which the Left has set sail.

Me, I think neither liberty nor equality, in their modern sense, has much value at all. They have been tried as the bases for society, and found wanting. I think there should be equality before the law, and that only. I think there should be the ordered liberty to lead a virtuous life, and beyond that to live one's life as one chooses, without undue interference from the government (which should be tiny and based aggressively on subsidiarity), but nonetheless tightly constrained by societal norms and demands, combined with no necessary right to political participation, much less universal suffrage and the pursuit of

more democracy. But all this is a topic for future expansion—for now, my conclusion is that I was entirely right that the Left project combines a simultaneous demand for unfettered liberty and universal equality, and there is no contradiction in practice in the Left's implementation of their demands.