

THE NEGATIVE DIALECTIC OF EQUALITY AND FREEDOM

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We attempt today, particularly in industrial states, to promote a certain type of social order. The justification for this order could be expressed in the terms: equality and freedom. At the core of this social order, however, there is a dilemma. The attempts to achieve equality and freedom are vitiating one another. What I present here is intended to explain the source of this dilemma.

The questions which the article addresses itself to in particular are as follows. Is a social order based on equality and freedom a novel event? How do equality and freedom relate to one another; are they inseparable from each other; is it possible to have one without the other? Are equality and freedom moral ideals, and if so, are they rational goals? The questions themselves are not new. And in order to benefit from the wisdom of earlier answers to these questions, we can begin by looking at two people who have left a record of their views on the subjects of equality and freedom.

Some Informants

Alexis de Tocqueville in "Democracy in America" noted that while freedom appeared in the world at different times, it had not been exclusively bound to any social condition; and that it was not confined to democracies. The distinguishing characteristic of democratic ages was not in fact freedom, but equality of condition.¹ Equality was the ruling passion of men in these ages. All men and powers who sought to cope with this inevitable passion would be overcome and destroyed by it.² Tocqueville judged that in our age freedom could not be established without equality, and despotism

¹Alexis de Tocqueville, "Democracy in America" (N.Y., 1954), Vol. II, p. 100.

²Ibid., p. 103.

could not reign without its support. "Every central power, which follows its natural tendencies courts and encourages the principle of equality; for equality singularly facilitates, extends, and secures the influence of a central power."³ But democratic institutions awaken and foster a passion for equality they can never entirely satisfy. And if "The lower orders are agitated by the chance of success, they are irritated by its uncertainty; and they pass from the enthusiasm of pursuit to the exhaustion of ill success, and lastly to the acrimony of disappointment . . . and there is no superiority . . . which is not irksome in their sight."⁴ For that reason democratic institutions foster envy while equality cultivates selfishness and a lack of sympathy for anyone but ourselves.

The irresistible nature of the ideal of equality, described by Tocqueville, is presented in similar terms by Kierkegaard. He refers to the egalitarian movement as a silent, mathematical and abstract occupation, which shuns upheaval.⁵ Where in the past we have had the great individual and the masses in a dialectic of followers and leaders, now we have representation. The majority sees itself not as being led, but as being represented; and its logical —though mistaken— fulfillment of this achievement is leveling: the negative reciprocity of all individuals.⁶ Kierkegaard's use of the principle of negativity is parallel to the role of envy in Tocqueville. In the view of the former the present age is a reflective and passionless one; and just as in a passionate age enthusiasm is the unifying principle, in the present age envy is the negative principle. It is a moral resentment that not only defends itself against all existing forms of distinction, but is a resentment which establishes itself in the process of leveling.

Both Tocqueville and Kierkegaard found common roots for the culture of leveling. Tocqueville wrote that "When the religion of a people is destroyed, doubt gets hold of the higher powers of the intellect and half paralyzes all the others. Every man accustoms himself to having only confused and changing notions on the subjects most interesting to his fellow creatures and himself. His opinions are ill-defended and easily abandoned; and, in despair of ever solving by himself the hard problems respecting the destiny of man, he ignobly submits to think no more about them."⁷ Such a condition, he adds, cannot but enervate the soul, relax the springs of the will, and

³Ibid., p. 312.

⁴Ibid., Vol. II, p. 208.

⁵Soren Kierkegaard, "The Present Age" (N.Y., 1940), p. 27.

⁶Ibid., p. 28.

⁷Tocqueville, op. cit., Vol. II, pp. 22-23.

prepare a people for servitude. For Kierkegaard the leveling process which arises when the individual ceases to exist as singled out by religion before God, and with an eternal responsibility, is bound to continue like a trade wind and consume everything.⁸

The circumstances above are not unique to the last two centuries. In Greece, e.g., the transition from rule by aristocratic families to oligarchies, and the oscillation between oligarchy and democracy, was accompanied by demands for equal rights. The latter years of the Roman Empire saw a similar development. In each instance the growth of wealth, of trade, and of urban centers, was accompanied by the demand for equality. On the contrary, in archaic and traditional societies as long as the infrastructure is of a subsistence or reciprocal type, equal rights do not become an issue. When equal rights do become a normative demand, the administration of goods and services has undergone a transformation. In archaic or traditional economies the administration of goods and services is guided by rationales which are social as well as economic. One's share is established along the lines of custom, so that the problem of what is just is resolved by the subordination of the question of distribution to traditional institutions, i.e., to a sociohistoric ethos. Any commercial stratum is subordinate to this social order. In a money economy, however, the dominant rationale is money itself. Distinctions between individuals and classes on the basis of birth, heredity or nobility can exist, but they are not decisive. When equal rights, therefore become a moral norm, the relation between the social order and the economy has undergone a reversal.

The Dialectic

The nature of the problem, in its broad outline at least, is evident. First there is an archaic or traditional society where the economy is subordinate to the norms of communal life. These norms are the measure of justice, and the limits of freedom. Then there is the dissolution of those structures and the democratization of institutions. The emphasis is no longer on the community or tradition, but on the individual. Since the emphasis on the individual is at the expense of his ties to the many, both social structures and the cognitive ones pit individuals against one another. This situation occurred in the vortex of change which affected Greece during and after the lengthy conflict with Persia. There were challenges to the aristocracy, to tradition, to the city-state as the principle which ordered collective life; and to the importance of the community in

⁸Kierkegaard, op. cit., p. 32.

contrast to the desires of the individual. This was complemented by a rationalist critique of tradition, and a naturalistic one of religion.

Justice becomes a distinct problem in such economies because of the dissolution of structures which formerly served as normative for communal life. And chief among these structures is the religious institution. When its normative influence is lessened, there is no longer a fixed ground for the normative role of other institutions. In the modern period, it was the market ideology which served as a substitute; and justified the maximizing, competitive and utilitarian character of human associations. Ethical, axiological and religious norms were subordinated to its point of view in policy and decision making. For example, your investments are made on the basis of expected returns; they are not chosen because of their benefit to the common welfare. The policy of investing on the basis of social justice runs counter to the logic of the market ideology, and its model of decision making.

The Purposefully Rational Model

Since the implementation of automated technologies and automated information systems, the rational model of decision making has intensified its 'normative' role. In doing so it has brought into relief its own dilemma; for while it functions reasonably well as a norm in problems of scale, namely supply, demand, cost and revenue; equality and freedom are not amenable to such an analysis. This is so since the state and its structures have as their indispensable condition a living community whose basis is an unreasoning, spontaneous state of confidence, a "we." Society, as contrasted to community, is a tissue of relationships rooted in the self-interest of the individual parties. The relationship here is one of suspicion and distrust. The purposefully rational model has its proper subject matter in society.

Among the philosophical currents, both ethical and sociological, however, which have dominated the last two centuries, the community has been subordinated to society. And society is understood in contractual terms. Social structures such as the state, laws, economic institutions, are explained in this way. It is also in and by these institutions that the purposefully rational model of decision making is applied. The decision making criteria, therefore, have for their framework the subordination of the life-community to society. And for that reason the egocentric relations of society require a contract, or some form of fiction, to legitimate institutional authority. By attempting to legitimate the state, its functions, economic cooperation and juridical institutions, on this basis, one ignores their sociohistoric nature. For the state and society are

founded on an ethos, not on a contract.⁹ In effect, statal structures, economic and juridical ones, are only possible given a community of life. They are not a possibility between egoists seeking success. Something has to sustain relations between the latter before rational models can have a milieu for their application. Achieving equality and freedom on the basis of a rational model assumes the basis of human relationships is contractual. The equality in question is that between parties to a contract; the freedom sought is the freedom to enter into and negotiate further contracts. It was this freedom and equality which were inhibited by the structures of traditional social unities.

The dialectic is between equality and freedom, but it is also between the life-community and the individuated milieu of rational agents. The equality that is achieved in society is the equality between buyer and seller. But not all buyers and sellers are equal, for the power to purchase and consume is not equally distributed. Equality is considered synonymous with justice, i.e., what is fair; but in practice an acceptable inequality is established, and considered fair. Or, it is recognized as unfair, and thought to be unavoidable. In either case, injustice is a part of the egalitarian order. Freedom, too, is indispensable to a just order. But it is modified by inequality, and by large scale societal management. Today it is the public being, i.e., the citizen, who is the object of societal management; and his role is understood according to criteria that define the rational in naturalistic and scientific terms. The consequences of such a view of human relations is to favor the common rather than unique values and qualities of peoples, communities and individuals. On this plane, equality is biological; for human beings are most alike as regards organic needs and their search for well-being. But on those levels which are most properly human, i.e., culture, beauty, the sacred and holy, individuals and peoples are most unique.

As to the second instance of the dialectic, we find the life-community is 'tied' together by bonds of loyalty and friendship, whereas society coalesces along the lines of mutual advantage. But equal and free individuals acting together for reasons of mutual advantage are not actually acting together for positive reasons, namely their loved and shared way of life, culture, history and value. They are in consort with one another in as much as they are competitors. Therefore, the suspicion and conflict which are charac-

⁹Max Scheler, "Le Formalisme en éthique" (Paris, 1955), pp. 509-519; pp. 525-540 in the German edition (1927); Scheler reviews the errors in the conception of the state and the person in these pages.

teristic of society present us with a tableau which Kierkegaard described as the negative unity of the negative reciprocity of all individuals. Such a social unity is not founded on the cohesive nature of the ethos of a life-community, but on a model of human associations in which rationality, not friendship, has a normative function. It is a justification of life in common that is profoundly anti-social.

To defend such a view of modern society has been the effort of modern thinkers, e.g., Locke. This strain of thought continues in John Rawls. His argument employs as its point of departure the "original position of equality," which corresponds to the state of nature in social contract theory. The original situation, however, is not thought of as an historical state of affairs, much less a primitive condition of culture. It is an expository device.¹⁰ Among the essential features of this situation are:

(a) no one knows his place in society; (b) his class or status; (c) nor does anyone know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence, strength and the like; (d) he assumes that the parties do not know their conceptions of the good or their special psychological propensities. The device recognizes the existence of actual inequalities. By enumerating them it assumes human associations to be between rational egoists. The rationality inherent in the use of the device of an "original position of equality" is not imaginary, but part of the purposefully rational model. It is a rationality which is to be interpreted "as far as possible in the narrow sense, standard in economic theory, of taking the most effective means to given ends," Rawls writes.¹¹

His device is in accord with the doctrine of the moral equality of all men. In it, there are no original dispositions of moral value. Moral value pertains only to those qualities and actions which result from the individual's own strength and labor.¹² All existing inequalities can be reduced to different quantities of work and experience. And when this is not possible, they are founded on unjust and artificial institutions. These two traits of the doctrine of equality are based on a rejection of a value hierarchy, and a distrust of institutions. They are also the source of the negative dialectic, i.e., the conflicts in policies and programs manifesting these traits.

The Negative Dialectic

Progressive tax structures, the levels of welfare or social security, and the statistical definition of poverty, are efforts directed at the

¹⁰John Rawls, 'A Theory of Justice' (Cambridge, 1971), p. 12.

¹¹Ibid., p. 14.

¹²Max Scheler, "Ressentiment" (N.Y., 1961), pp. 138-140.

distribution of income. It is a question in these instances of the right, best, or desired distribution of income. In practice, it is a question as to the degree of inequality which is to be normative. The problem is, how can the purposefully rational model of social action justify economic and social inequality without equating justice with the status quo? The consequences of the problem are evident in social policies. The minimum wage, unemployment benefits, training and retraining and pensions, are attempts at equality. But equality as it is administered in these programs is distinct from the doctrine of universal moral equality. In the programs mentioned above, as in welfare and food stamps, one is concerned with the administration and distribution of the goods necessary for a human existence. Properly speaking, that is social justice; and it is not synonymous with the doctrine of moral equality. Equality in the sense of social justice, understood traditionally rather than contractually, is concerned with what is right, and recognizes inequalities between estates and classes. Equality, in the above sense of a doctrine, is concerned with what is fair; but it legitimates, also, class structures with their inequalities. The difference between the two is that in the first instance the administration of goods and services is guided by a vision of the good, i.e., an objective axiology. In the second instance, social justice is not guided by an objective norm. It is guided by sociological ethics, sociological law, and by this means intends to avoid the ethical import of social justice.

The measures above are those of the welfare state, and support a collective responsibility that is inconsistent with the liberal-democratic ideology.¹³ For it stresses individual rights and individual freedoms. The legal formulas which assure the black and Spanish speaking of equal representation are the recognition of ethnic and racial differences between citizens under a constitution which recognizes citizens, not their color, or their national identity. In these contradictions we see the ideology of the Enlightenment seeking to adjust to the social realities, but the attempt is being made without an evaluation of those socio centric criteria which have formed its view of human relationships. The result is the continued regard of communal life as inferior to associational life, and the latter is believed manageable by rational means. At the present time, the rational means are identified as scientific management in general, and economic management in particular.

¹³U.S. readers tend to identify the terms "liberal-democratic" with the wing of a political party. On the contrary, liberal-democratic ideology describes the basic tenets of capitalist states concerning human nature and its acquisitiveness. Political parties are only variations on this perspective.

However, if the liberal state labors under a burden of philosophical and constitutional inconsistencies, it does attempt to preserve the individual's freedom in productive choices, e.g., occupation, profession; and as a consumer, e.g., where one lives, one's life style, one's tastes. What haunts its efforts at social justice and individual freedom is the doctrine of moral equality. It is this that prompts, e.g., constitutional amendments for minorities, and for women. Supporting its outlook is the purposefully rational model and the axiom of equality. Its application means that institutions, family law, labor law, medicine, ethos, custom and the remnants of tradition, shall be examined from the critical point of view. Because human life is viewed primarily from the perspective of societal relations, human and cultural problems are considered proper subject matter for methods employed by economic models and in industrial management. From this perspective equality and freedom are to be achieved by reason and will. Liberal-democratic ideology is committed to this view. This makes sense as long as one is formulating a social philosophy, or alternatively a theory of social justice, according to which the rationale of human institutions is an enlightened self-interest; and as long as one is assured that there is nothing in society that is not the product of human reason and human will. But the hierarchy of value in the sociohistoric being we call a community, and the extra-rational considerations of individual and collective action, are part of human relations; and they continually compromise liberal-democratic formulations of social policy.

The crosscurrents between equality and freedom are more than problems arising out of the application of erring principles to complex situations. Lester Thurow wrote early in the 1970s that "Most of the current government instruments for reducing inflation, such as creating recessions, limiting interest rates for small savers, and resisting cost of living escalators only serve to make the poor worse off. At the moment the poor are asked to pay the price necessary to stop inflation for the rest of society."¹⁴ What one witnessed then is not much different from the present situation. The increase of profits, along with continuing and increasing inflation, is being paid for by those with little or no power to pass along costs. But the situation itself is one where pricing is dominated by monopolistic rather than consumer control of the market. And this means the

¹⁴"The American Distribution of Income: A Structural Problem," A Study Prepared For The Use of The Joint Economic Committee, Congress of The United States by Lester C. Thurow and Robert E.B. Lucas, March 17, 1972, p. 45.

presence of an elite: equality as an ideal on the one hand, and the presence of domination on the other.

The Doctrine of Equality

Money societies are class societies, and class societies have their socioeconomic strata. Some people have more, and some have less. It is not a question of whether society will be an economic or social pyramid. Where private property is not admitted, e.g., the U.S.S.R., these strata also exist. The question is not how long a class structured social unity can make credible the doctrine of moral equality. The essential question is how this fiction will contribute to the agitation, acrimony and resentment, that undermine the cohesiveness of institutions necessary for life in common? A just society is not identical with the efficient management of an economic and social system. It requires a pattern to which the social system can conform. Today, this requires a global vision of the human race. In practice, heads of state do not agree on any one view of justice. I believe that the two globally dominant ideologies, liberal-democratic and Marxist, are bankrupt in this regard. Yet the era of automated technology and automated information systems begets evils as injurious to the human spirit as those of the nineteenth century industrialization. To assuage this all that is offered is societal management where equality-inequality are traceable in terms of statistical averages, and the human spirit and culture are subject to manipulation.

What equality has meant at its best is the form of equality one finds among friends. To have this form of equality is the highest achievement of life in common. But the egoistic image of man in the liberal-democratic ideology conflicts with this achievement. In Marxist ideology we have a reaction to this condition. But we find it in accord with the liberal democratic ideology when it takes the human being to be no more than a high grade organism. The result is the objective uniformity of life under its sway: a leveling equality.

All of this has its effect on freedom. In the Greek sense freedom meant the participation of citizens in government. This was actual participation, not representation. It was the exercise of the rights and duties of citizenship, including office holding. Freedom in the industrial states has been increasingly limited by the concentration of new forms of wealth in dominant minorities, who in turn shape the policies of representative government. Even the inner freedom, which in the West became identified with freedom as such, has seen the desire of one's own perfection displaced. Increasingly, the focus of freedom is on the exercise of individual ambitions in order to rise above one's present status. This is not the freedom of rational and responsible citizens. For in the three dominant bureaucratic struc-

tures of industrial society, namely government, business and education, the work slots are filled by tens of millions of people who do not do their own will, but the will, i.e., the policies, of an elite.

Herman Kahn wrote in "The Year Two Thousand" that by that date the single greatest social problem would be the meaninglessness of life. If we allow the rational model to become the sole norm for social policy, not balancing it with the norms of history, tradition and an axiology, we will have pushed further that set of contemporary trends characterized as dehumanizing. And when we have done that, humankind will have reason still to distrust one another, to be suspicious, competitive and aggressive. But little of this will be balanced by friendship. The ideal of the aristocratic state, however, was friendship. Its duties and obligations were the models for conduct. The breakup of this ideal offered instead the emphasis on one's family and property. Paradoxically, it is the reversal of the former ideal which has lessened the sense of fraternity; and that is a lessening of love in communal life, which is the definition of a meaningless existence. For without love the sky is lead, and the earth is brass. All live, equal and free, to no end but the consumer civilization.

This state of things, however, was neither unforeseen nor unwanted. A number of thinkers, e.g., Spencer, have seen the rational society as no longer requiring love or sacrifice. Their naturalistic explanation of human associations looked forward to a realization of well-being and the common welfare in the absence of any higher values than those of utility and well-being. In accord with this is the purposefully rational model of decision making. Its aspiration for the future is that self-interest will have been expanded from the sphere of one's ego to encompass all the other egos. And, therefore, it is not love, sacrifice or friendship, which will promote a human civilization; but those same characteristics which the liberal-democratic ideology has all along predicated of human nature. Only now they shall have matured sufficiently to have become other regarding. Social justice will require only good managers of the 'system' in order to be achieved. What this presupposes is that the highest value is well-being.

The assumption supporting the value of well-being as both dominant and universal is plain in Auguste Comte. Namely, that the values of any one individual exhaust the field of values for every other individual. Of course, this can only be true at the lowest rung of values, i.e., those of well-being and utility. What is good, then, possesses equal validity for all. The outcome of this rational ethic is the legitimation of the principle that individual conscience left to do as it chooses is incompatible with societal well-being. For once all

values and individuals are equal, the basis for preserving freedom of choice is comprised. It may even appear as caprice, e.g., choosing a spouse, deciding the size of one's family, choosing one's work. By basing ethics, and therefore justice, on biology and history, or on sociology, this positivist perspective ignores the only genuine basis for ethical knowledge. It must be founded on an axiological experience. What is substituted for this discernment is a technology of conduct suitable to the common well-being.

From the outset the justification of a social order based on equality and freedom was its inherent rationality as compared to the estate system, feudalism and traditional life. But the rationality in question is of a very specific type. It defines itself apart from value, i.e., the good, and leaves to one side the "controversial" ethical questions.¹⁵ How rational is such a conception of reason? In carrying the rationalization of human life beyond the original vision of the Enlightenment, we have arrived at the consensus that the contemporary period is a dehumanizing one. The more you consider the ideals of equality and freedom in the context of the rational society, the more evident it becomes that equality is a surrogate for community. Individuals in conflict, or in competition, have like juridical limitations; but are without shared ties.

Epilogue

The questions we asked at the beginning of the article can be answered as follows. A social order based on the principles of equality and freedom is not a novel event. At the same time, the existence of a social order that actually achieved equality and freedom is not easily discovered. An order based on equality and freedom usually went hand in hand with inequalities, and with constraints on freedom. We can divide the relation between equality and freedom into two parts. Where the money society is concerned, increasing equality leads to greater individual freedom; but the freedom tends to be the freedom of a consumer. It is not the freedom of the responsible citizen which is increased. In traditional societies equality is understood to be proportionate to one's social position, and one's freedom is in accord with that status. In the sense of being free from the leveling uniformity of mass society, there is a greater personal freedom.

As to having either equality or freedom, i.e., one without the other; it is possible. A reductionist equality which denies the spiritual nature, and consequently the dignity of the human being, is certainly

¹⁵Rawls, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

possible. Also one can have freedom in the sense of political freedom, i.e., hold elective office, or purchase a title, without necessarily being equal to others in wealth, or even before the law.

To answer the question whether or not equality and freedom are moral ideals, let me define what a moral ideal is not. It is not a proposition whose content describes a function, or the state of an individual. Such propositions themselves arise out of a moral ideal. Therefore, moral ideals are not generated out of a purposefully rational model of action, but are already inherent in it. Moral ideals are generated by models of comportment, what Scheler calls model persons. In traditional societies, e.g., the estate system of feudalism or the social unities of the life-community (family, nation); the models of comportment are those of the hero, the holy man, the sage or scholar, the artist or craftsman. Inherent in these models are qualities which perfect individuals in certain modes of action; none of which are aligned with the purposefully rational model of comportment. The rational model, in other words, is a counter-model. An what it runs counter to are the personal qualities of the models in traditional societies. They are grounded in communal cooperation where the infrastructure is one of reciprocal duties and responsibilities, and there is a social symmetry to production, distribution and consumption in which the natural character of human relations is recognized and safeguarded.¹⁶

The liberal state (in contrast to the welfare state) did not recognize the mutual and reciprocal nature of human ties. It was based on counter-models which define for us the nature of the moral ideal in the goals of equality and freedom. Not the holy man, but the scientist; not the hero, but the anti-hero; not the sage, but the expert; and not art for the perfection of a life lived in common, but art for the sake of art. The models are men of purposefully rational behavior in two instances; and in the other two instances they reject the rational model, at least overtly, i.e., in the case of the anti-hero and the artist. But the logic of their actions is all the more clearly seen as a rejection of tradition, of the past. All four share the distrust of the authority of the old order, and its axiological hierarchy. Equality and freedom, when understood in this context, are the counter moral ideals of a civilization which has transvalued its heritage. Both are negative ideals that are most easily felt and understood in contrast to what they reject, and less clearly understood when their own content is considered in itself.

¹⁶Karl Polanyi's essays in "Primitive, Archaic and Modern Economies" furnish a number of examples.

An Irish poet wrote that every civilization is a dream that is being born, or a dream that is dying. Equality and freedom, as discussed here, are the sign of a time in which at least some part of a civilization is dying. To go deeper into that death, however, would be to enter into a civilizational analysis which, though fascinating in itself, goes beyond our original bounds. In conclusion, if equality and freedom are pursued in the industrial state for the decades ahead; and if there is no serious modification of the secular trend (i.e., increasing social change, increasing innovation in technology, the continuing desacralization of social life, and the increasing tempo of these changes), the consequence will be an increase in the dissolution of the life communities and their social unities. And a corresponding increase of societal controls over individuals and institutions. It will mean a form of equality that establishes uniformity; an equality that does not consider the dignity of the individual, or the source of his worth.