

CHAPTER ONE

## The Meaning of Equality

*Nicholas Capaldi*

EQUALITY IS BOTH a descriptive concept and a normative concept. As a descriptive concept, equality is, by definition, an adjectival relation between entities that are identical in some specific respect. No two entities can be identical in all respects, for then they would not be two entities but the same entity. The equality may be one of quantity or quality. Equality may be predicated of things, persons, or social entities such as institutions, groups, and so on.

Equality is also a normative concept. As a normative concept, equality is the notion that there is some special respect in which all human beings are in fact equal (descriptive) but that this factual equality requires that we treat them in a special way. Special treatment may mean ensuring identical treatment, or it may mean differential treatment to restore them to or to aid them in reaching or realizing the specific factual state.

Equality as a normative concept, as we shall soon show, is central to modern political and social debate. All disagreements about equality as a normative concept center on (1) factual claims about the specific sense or senses in which human beings are identical, (2) what constitutes relevant special treatment, that is, which specific

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senses carry normative weight, and (3) factual claims about which public policies are consistent and coherent with and effective in ensuring the relevant special treatment.

## EQUALITY IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

The ancients held to an organic and hierarchical conception of the world, one, therefore, that was antiegalitarian. All of nature, including the social world, consists of a series of interlocking entities, each with its own built-in goal. Each entity in turn was a means to the satisfaction of a higher-level goal. The social world was highly stratified to reflect differences of ability that in turn led to differences of function and a corresponding difference in status. The ancient world thus held to the notion of a collective good, that is, a good that was more important than and subsumed all of the lesser goods. This view was reflected in actual social practice, so that even within Athenian democracy, women, slaves, and aliens were excluded from citizenship. The collective good consisted of the survival of the city as an internally self-ruled entity. It was the city, or polis, that was the locus of freedom, understood as self-rule. Freedom was not predicated on individuals. Rather, individuals were fulfilled when they performed their relevant proper function in maintaining the city's freedom. No sharp distinction was made among politics, ethics, and religion. Ultimate fulfillment came within the political order.

Classical political theorists advanced the same view. In Plato's *Republic*, a just society was identified with a harmonious society, and a harmonious society consisted of one in which the division of labor was exactly correlated with individual differences of ability. Even when Plato seemingly recognized superior women and advocated the equality of women, many scholars have maintained that he did so tongue-in-cheek and ultimately stressed the need for an overriding functional division of labor. For Aristotle, equality

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meant the “same treatment of similar persons,”<sup>1</sup> that is, persons who had the same status. Aristotle was more concerned that those who were unequal be treated differently. Moreover, the demand for equality on the part of those who are unequal or inferior leads, according to Aristotle, to revolution.<sup>2</sup> Among Roman thinkers, the Stoics asserted a form of factual equality in that all men possessed the rational capacity to grasp the universal order, but the Stoics did not draw from this any normative conclusions about altering social status.

## MEDIEVAL WORLD

Christianity is the origin of the modern conception of equality, but, as we shall see, its full impact does not come into play until the Reformation. Christianity proclaimed the equal moral worth of all persons in the eyes of God. Equality is now understood as intrinsic to the human condition. It is the special respect in which all human beings are in fact equal (descriptive).

Christians drew both on Stoic doctrine and the Hebrew notion from Genesis that all human beings “male and female” were created in the “image of God.” The Christian doctrine of equality as expressed by Paul (Galatians 3:26–29) is that “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.” This view was repeated in Colossians 3:10–11. There are echoes of this conception of equality in Confucianism, Hinduism, and Islam.

The question arises as to what specific normative implications follow from this conception of equality in the medieval Christian context. Recognizing equality among human beings requires that

1. Aristotle, *Politics*, translated by Benjamin Jowett, in *Britannica Great Books*, vol. 9 (Chicago: 1952), VII, 14.

2. *Ibid.*, VI, 1.

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we treat them in a special way. Special treatment may mean ensuring identical treatment, or it may mean differential treatment to restore them to or to aid them in reaching the specific factual state.

To understand how this developed in the medieval Christian context, we need to recognize the political innovation of Christianity. In the words of Eric Voegelin, Christianity dedivinized the state. That is, Christians denied that ultimate human fulfillment was to be achieved through participation in the polis. A distinction is introduced between politics on the one side and religion and ethics on the other. Fulfillment comes through participation in the Church. Christians, then, occupy two “cities,” to use Augustine’s conception. Whereas the role of the polis in Aristotle was a positive one, namely, to help make human beings good or to achieve fulfillment, the role of the state in Augustine’s scheme is negative, namely, to thwart evil, or what we would call maintain law and order. Christian liberty consists in the recognition by the state of the independent status of the Church, and that fulfillment comes within the spiritual domain. This is the origin of the modern conception of limiting the power of the state.

Because fulfillment comes by participation within the Church, Christians have no direct interest in political participation or political rights such as equality before the law. Christians could technically even be slaves. Slavery was held to be a consequence of sin. With regard to membership within the Church, Christians still maintained the classical hierarchical conception. Clergy were distinguished from laypeople. This was not considered a violation of the notion of Christian equality because to achieve salvation, the sacraments needed to be administered by someone in a theologically superior position. Christians were all equally entitled to the special treatment of receiving the sacraments that paved the way to eternal salvation in the next life. Non-Christians were all equally entitled to become Christians and subsequently to receive the sacraments. They were not all equally entitled to administer the sac-

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raments. Moreover, the sacraments could be denied to Christians who had been excommunicated precisely because they threatened the independent existence and integrity of the Church. Becket's conflict with Henry II comes to mind in this context. In short, Christian equality was seen in the medieval period to require special treatment understood in a way that led not to identical treatment but to differential treatment.

Two important consequences of Christian equality were the gradual disappearance of slavery in Europe and the fact that the Church served as the main institution of social mobility. When the issue of slavery with regard to the Native Americans in the New World was debated, it was Aristotle's argument about natural slaves that served as the basis for advocating slavery, and it was the Christian conception of the equality of all before God that served as the basis for opposing slavery. It was now thought that someone who had been baptized, including the native population of the Western Hemisphere, could not be enslaved.

## REFORMATION

Equality became a central notion with the advent of modernity, specifically the Protestant Reformation. Let us begin with modernity. The difference between the classical viewpoint and the modern viewpoint is the locus of standards. For classical thinkers, including medieval thinkers, all standards whether of truth, goodness, or beauty were structural features of the world external to human beings. What gave authority to some and not to others was the belief that some individuals had direct and immediate access to those external standards (by knowledge or grace). Once those standards were apprehended, our obligation was to conform to them. The object of wisdom was conformity to the natural order of the world.

For modern thinkers, all standards are internal. The apprehen-

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sion of these internal standards might lead to contact with a transcendent and/or external order (as in Descartes), but the initial apprehension was internal. The internality of standards was reflected in areas as diverse as science, where Copernicus made us aware of the relativity of perception, and art, where Renaissance artists gloried in the exploration of perspective. Moreover, the apprehension of internal standards required that we conform to them, but conformity to internal standards came to mean the transformation of the external world to conform to these internal standards. From commerce to technology to landscape gardening, modernity led to a transformation of the understanding of how individuals relate to the world.

The medieval Aristotelian synthesis in which all of nature and humanity were linked in an interlocking series of organic associations arranged in hierarchical order was rejected. Nature was not an organism but a mechanism created by God, and we as individuals replicated God's creativity by transforming the world through good works (including commerce and industry, not only charity) inspired by the internally apprehended divine vision. There was no collective good to be authoritatively apprehended in nature, only a collection of individually apprehended goods whose continuity and coherence were vouchsafed by God.

In science, in religion, in morals, and in politics, the Aristotelian hierarchical synthesis was challenged. One of the most important challenges was the rejection of the idea of natural political hierarchies, both within the Church and in the secular political sphere. The first and most striking instance was the Protestant attack on the hierarchical notion of the Church. As Luther put it in "To the Christian Nobility" (1520), "It is pure invention that popes, bishops, priests and monks are to be called the 'spiritual estate' . . . . There is really no difference . . . . it is intolerable that in the canon law so much importance is attached to the freedom, life, property of the clergy . . . . Why are your life and limb, property and honor

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so free, and mine not? . . . Whence comes this great distinction between those who are equally Christian? Only from human laws and inventions!”<sup>3</sup> Calvin expressed the full political implications of Reformation Christian equality. Authority derives from voluntary agreement among equals to submit—this is first confined to the organization of the Church and then extended to the entire political sphere. Anabaptists, most notably Thomas M nzer, went even further and asserted complete social equality to be achieved by violence if necessary. In short, modern egalitarianism originated in the Christian notion of equality as reflected within the context of other modern institutions and practices.

The so-called Protestant work ethic promoted the notion of the inner-directed individual, an emphasis on work or achievement, equality before the law and differentiation based on achievement. The insistence on equality before the law was an expression of the notion of Christian liberty. In rejecting a hierarchical conception of the world, Protestants could acquiesce in an arrangement in which the political realm was not subordinate to the religious realm. At the same time, the political realm was obliged to respect the traditional spiritual realm of Christianity. The spiritual realm was now understood in Protestant terms to mean the opportunity to do God’s work by transforming the world economically and all of its attendant circumstances. Equality before the law came to mean that there should be no legal barriers to economic activity that did not apply equally to everyone. To place legal barriers to equal participation in the economic realm was to thwart God’s plan.

Because not all were equal in their achievement, not all were to be treated in the same manner. There was to be a meritocracy, but the meritocracy was a reflection not of simple personal merit but of

3. Martin Luther, “To the Christian Nobility,” in *Three Treatises* (1520; Reprint, Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press 1960), pp. 14–19.

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divine preordination. It was God, after all, who inspired us and accounted for the differences in achievement. However, higher status was more likely to be accompanied by a sense of greater responsibility, not by the privileges of self-indulgence.

This specifically Calvinist notion of political and legal equality influenced the Dutch, British, and American Revolutions. The Calvinist and Anabaptist influences converged in the English Civil War, specifically in a group known as the *Levellers*. The Levellers' membership reflected what we would now call the rising middle classes—small property owners, tradesmen, artisans, and apprentices. They produced a vast pamphlet literature in which, among other things, John Lilburne asserted the notion that no one has authority without consent. In a famous debate held at Putney (suburb of London) in 1647 with the officers at the Army Council meeting, speaking on behalf of the Levellers, Colonel Rainborough asserted that “the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live as the greatest he”; no one is obliged to obey a government “he hath not had a voice to put himself under.”<sup>4</sup> An irate Ireton responded on behalf of the officers that because the poor could outvote the rich, “why may not those men vote against all property?” Hence we get the derogatory expression *Levellers*, although this was certainly a misrepresentation of their views. The Levellers, being serious Protestants, wanted to deny the franchise to all those whom they considered lacking in moral independence, such as almstakers and house servants.

A much more radical group were the so-called Diggers. Their spokesperson Gerrard Winstanley rejected private property as a reflection of original sin and claimed that “one man hath as much

4. Statement made at the Agreement at Putney (October 1647). Quoted in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 29, 15th ed. (1986), p. 62.



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rights to the earth as another.”<sup>5</sup> He attributed the existence of poverty to exploitation by the rich, and advocated a form of agrarian communism.

The difference between the Levellers and the Diggers is a significant one and heralds an ongoing dialectic in the development of modern notions of equality. We might designate this as the difference between a relative equality and an absolute equality. Relative egalitarianism is the position that some specific existing practice or institution is unjust because it fosters inequality of treatment based on irrelevant differences. Absolute egalitarianism is the advocacy of a total equality that seems to entail a collective conception of the good in which the individual good is subsumed.

What the Levellers challenged was the political power structure and not the economic and social system. Their challenge was a consistent expression both of the religious dimension of Calvinism and of the commitment to doing God’s work in an increasingly market-oriented society. The Diggers, on the other hand, reflected the medieval Anabaptist call for complete equality within a feudal agrarian economy still committed to the notion of a collective good. The Levellers adhered to the Platonic-Augustinian insight that we live in two cities so that given original sin this world would always be an imperfect reflection of the City of God. Poverty was a result of a lack of moral independence that, in turn, was a result of original sin. The Diggers asserted the immanentization of the eschaton, so that not only were individuals not responsible for their own poverty but also that some sort of social utopia was possible here on earth.

Protestants during this period saw an important connection between politics and economics. The desire for political equality, that

5. Quoted from G. L. Abernethy, *The Idea of Equality: An Anthology* (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1959). (Quote originally appeared in “Truth Lifting Up Its Head Above Scandals,” 1649.)

is, government by consent, did not reflect any desire to exercise power for power's sake or to remake society. On the contrary, Protestants were largely focused on protecting the private sphere and the spiritual dimension from political corruption. Rather the connection they perceived between politics and economics derived from the fact that government controlled large parts of the economy (granting privileges such as monopolies, sinecures, land grants, etc.) so that political equality led to economic equality. Economic equality meant the liberty to pursue God's work in this world, not an equal distribution of the spoils. Part of that political equality was equality before the law.

Both Hobbes and Locke articulated doctrines of natural right and social contract that reflect this Protestant framework. The modern doctrine of natural right replaced the medieval doctrine of natural law as the fundamental bulwark against political oppression. In a nonteleological universe, natural law had lost its meaning. The classical idea of law is that it is a command from an authoritative source external to humanity. The modern idea of law is that it is a directive from an authoritative source internal to humanity. The physical world of modern science is mechanistic and not teleological; natural law in the normative sense can no longer be intelligibly applied to both the human and physical world. Teleology is to be found only within the human world. This is the origin of natural rights. The starting point (ontologically, axiologically, and epistemologically) is individualism. From this individualism we deduce conclusions about the social world. In its Lockean formulation, individualism reflected a Protestant moral and religious conception of the relation between the individual and God. Each individual was alleged to have a built-in end or set of such consistent ends. In its original Lockean formulation, these ends (e.g., life, liberty, and property) were designated as *rights* (qualified as natural, human, etc.); they were teleological. Rights, so understood, were absolute, did not conflict, and were possessed only by individual human

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beings. Rights were morally absolute or fundamental because they were derived from human nature and God (or later the categorical imperative), and as such could not be overridden; the role of these rights was to protect the human capacity to choose. Finally, such rights imposed only duties of noninterference.

## ENLIGHTENMENT AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

*Enlightenment*<sup>6</sup> is a term used broadly by historians of ideas to refer to the intellectual and social ferment in Western Europe during the eighteenth century. Our intention is not to generalize about this entire period but to identify a specific, salient project that we shall call the Enlightenment Project. What do we mean by the Enlightenment Project? The Enlightenment Project is the attempt to define and explain the human predicament through science as well as to achieve mastery over it through the use of a social technology. This project originated in France in the eighteenth century with the *philosophes*. The most influential among them were d'Alembert, La Mettrie, Condillac, Helvétius, d'Holbach, Turgot, Condorcet, Cabanis, and Voltaire.

Isaiah Berlin characterizes the Project as follows:

[T]here were certain beliefs that were more or less common to the entire party of progress and civilization, and this is what makes it proper to speak of it as a single movement. These were, in effect, the conviction that the world, or nature, was a single whole, subject to a single set of laws, in principle discoverable by the intelligence of man; that the laws which governed inanimate nature were in principle the same as those which governed plants, animals and sentient beings; that man was capable of improvement; that there existed certain objectively recognizable human goals which all men,

6. Much of this discussion of the Enlightenment is taken from Nicholas Capaldi, *The Enlightenment Project in the Analytic Conversation* (Boston: Kluwer, 1998), chapter one.

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rightly so described, sought after, namely, happiness, knowledge, justice, liberty, and what was somewhat vaguely described but well understood as virtue; that these goals were common to all men as such, were not unattainable, nor incompatible, and that human misery, vice and folly were mainly due to ignorance either of what these goals consisted in or of the means of attaining them—ignorance due in turn to insufficient knowledge of the laws of nature. . . . Consequently, the discovery of general laws that governed human behaviour, their clear and logical integration into scientific systems of psychology, sociology, economics, political science and the like (though they did not use these names)—and the determination of their proper place in the great corpus of knowledge that covered all discoverable facts, would, by replacing the chaotic amalgam of guesswork, tradition, superstition, prejudice, dogma, fantasy and “interested error” that hitherto did service as human knowledge and human wisdom (and of which by far the chief protector and instigator was the Church), create a new, sane, rational, happy, just and self-perpetuating human society, which, having arrived at the peak of attainable perfection, would preserve itself against all hostile influences, save perhaps those of nature.”<sup>7</sup>

Randall identifies the intellectual origins of the project as follows: “Voltaire and his successors took over and used four main bodies of English ideas. First, there was Newtonian science, which was developed in France into a thoroughgoing materialism. Secondly, there was natural religion, or Deism, which the French pushed to atheism. Thirdly, there was Locke and British empiricism, which became theoretically a thoroughgoing sensationalism, and practically the omnipotence of the environment. Finally, there were British political institutions as interpreted by Locke, the apologist for 1688, which became the basis of the political theories of the Revolution.”<sup>8</sup>

7. I. Berlin, *The Magus of the North: J. G. Hamann and the Origins of Modern Irrationalism* (London: John Murray, 1993), pp. 27–28.

8. J. H. Randall, *The Career of Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), p. 862.

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This project had three philosophical elements: metaphysical, epistemological, and axiological.

Metaphysically, the *philosophes* who formulated the Enlightenment Project were philosophic naturalists: they asserted both that the physical world was the only reality and that it could be explained exclusively by modern natural science. La Mettrie's *L'Homme machine* (1747) specifically aimed to reduce mental processes to their physiological causes. La Mettrie openly declared atheism:

The universe will never be happy, unless it is atheistic. . . . If atheism were generally accepted, all the forms of religion would then be destroyed and cut off at the roots. . . . Deaf to all other voices, tranquil mortals would follow only the spontaneous dictates of their own being, the only commands which can never be despised with impunity and which alone can lead us to happiness. . . . Let us then conclude boldly that man is a machine, and that in the whole universe there is but a single substance differently modified.”<sup>9</sup>

Its epistemology is Aristotle's and Locke's epistemology without a soul or an active intellect. The product of this is empiricism. Following Locke, Condillac was led to engage in analysis, the breaking down of the contents of the human mind into elementary units and then reconstituting or ordering those units into a whole. The whole was to be understood in terms of its constituent and separable parts. Departing from Locke, Condillac suggested that sensory impressions could give rise to all of our mental operations without reference to a self or active intellect. Cabanis summarizes the connection between the metaphysics and the epistemology as follows: “We are doubtless not still required to prove that physical sensibility is the source of all the ideas and of all the habits which constitute the moral existence of man: Locke, Bonnet, Condillac,

9. J. A. La Mettrie, *L'Homme machine*, edited by A. Vartanian (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), pp. 175–76.

Helvétius have carried this truth to the last degree of demonstration.”<sup>10</sup>

Its axiology can be characterized as natural right, without God. Morality, according to Condillac, arises as a refinement of volitional operations that originate from a combination of both internal and external physical stimuli without the interposition of an agent. Earlier, La Mettrie, in *L’Homme machine*, denied free will in favor of determinism, but he also asserted that human materialism gave rise, in a manner never explained, to an internal teleology characterized by a hierarchy of values. This internal teleology could be perfected by a kind of medical technology. In his *Discours sur le bonheur* (1750), La Mettrie described the highest good as the maximization of the pleasurable well-being of the human machine. In his 1776 publication, *Le Commerce et le gouvernement considérés relativement l’un à l’autre*, Condillac argued against mercantilism in favor of free trade and maintained that reason would discover social laws endorsing private property.

Condillac and Helvétius used the doctrine of environmental determinism to reinforce the doctrine of natural equality. Natural equality was now understood in purely secular terms so that human beings were alleged to be naturally good. These two doctrines imply a third doctrine, perfectibility. This is the scientific or social-scientific origin of equality.

The naturalistic-mechanistic worldview allows for a social technology that could in principle solve all human problems. Hence, we see the enthusiasm for mechanistic science. Mechanistic views of human nature are attractive because they are compatible with the idea that human beings are both a tabula rasa and fundamentally good. Hence, human beings could be either caused to be good, or obstacles to their natural goodness could be removed. It was no

10. P.J.G. Cabanis, *Rapports du physique et du moral de l’homme*, vol. 1, 2d ed. (Paris, 1805), pp. 39, 85.

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accident that freedom in the modern world came to be defined, in one version, as the absence of external constraints. In an analogous way, rationality could seemingly be promoted either mechanically or by removing constraints such as the belief in religion, authority, custom, or tradition. This has the added benefit of reinforcing the progressive-scientific story by seemingly providing a naturalistic account of why it has taken so long to arrive at the truth of the Enlightenment Project.

Given the economic and social challenges of the modern world, it seemed to many of those impatient to alter the status quo that a wholesale rejection of authority, tradition, and the religious institutions that seemed to support the status quo was the quickest way to achieve reform, hence, the enthusiasm for a seemingly liberated reason. Because traditional institutions had justified themselves on the grounds that they embodied a certain wisdom about human shortcomings, mechanistic theories about the natural goodness of human nature would seem doubly attractive to critics of the status quo.

Enlightenment psychology in particular and programmatic Enlightenment social science in general were not the product of an explication of the actual empirical accomplishments of the social sciences. Rather, these were conclusions from unargued philosophical premises and a political agenda. In practice, this led to two programs: either a militant reductivism or a miraculous functional dualism. By *functional dualism* is meant the contention that physical processes at one level were perfectly coordinated with conscious processes at another level, that is, a dualism of mechanism and teleology. This dualism is “miraculous” because without some appeal to God, it is difficult to see why a deterministic system should also function coincidentally as a teleological one. Locke believed that God could make matter “think,” but within the Enlightenment Project no appeal to theistic notions was permitted. So, just as the Enlightenment Project required a providential history with-

out God, so it required a miraculous psychological dualism without God. The Enlightenment Project never succeeded in explaining, either in its epistemology or in its psychology, how the human subject could be understood without appeal to teleology of some kind and at some level.

This is important for the consideration of equality. Earlier we noted that equality was the notion that there was some special respect in which all human beings were in fact equal (descriptive); this definition of equality has normative implications. In a teleological system, all facts do carry normative weight. For example, if it is a fact that our built-in end or purpose or goal is to achieve or reach a certain condition, then it makes sense to say that we ought to act consistently with the achievement of that condition. In a mechanical or deterministic system, there are no natural goals, merely states of affairs and, in the human case, drives. It is not clear what it would mean to say that we ought to act in order to satisfy a drive. The drive operates on its own, and it is either powerful enough or “lucky” enough to prevail or it is not.

There is one unusually disturbing and perplexing axiological problem for the Enlightenment Project. That problem is the loss of the self. As we stressed in our discussion of epistemology, proponents of the Enlightenment Project denied the existence of an active intellect with special and unique functions. As we stressed in our discussion of both metaphysics and epistemology, proponents of the Enlightenment Project denied the existence of a subject that was not an object or not reducible to a collection of objects. Most especially, this amounted to the denial of the idea of the free and personally responsible individual soul that emerged out of the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian worldview.

The denial of the self thus serves a number of important and interrelated purposes for the Enlightenment Project. Metaphysically it reinforces the claim that the physical world is primary. In a



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very important sense, the entire Western intellectual tradition prior to the Enlightenment had made self-understanding primary. Coincidentally it is a further attack on the theistic contention of a unique volitional being. Epistemologically, the denial of the self reinforces the claim that knowledge is nothing but the grasping of an external structure. Failure to grasp the structure cannot be attributed to any act of the will but becomes in principle explainable in terms of further objective structures. This gives a tremendous boost to rationalist optimism. Finally, the denial of the self serves the axiological function of providing for an objective social technology that does not depend on human attitudes that are not externally manipulable. Put in other terms, intellectual virtue would not depend on moral virtue, nor could there be a failure of the will, and there would be no problem of freedom of the will.

In its origins, the Enlightenment Project was intended to provide a secular rationale for liberal culture. By *liberal culture* is meant the concatenation of the technological project (conquest of nature), market economies, limited government, rule of law, individual rights, and toleration. There were two different endorsements. The first view, which is the origin of methodological individualism, assumed the truths of physicalism, empiricism, associationism, and intellectual hedonism. Because human nature partakes of the natural harmony of the universe, enlightened self-interest implies that human beings can manage their own affairs without government interference. As Randall put it:

[S]ensationalism, associationism, hedonism, and intellectualism were ostensibly the outcome of a mechanical analysis of human nature. Actually, they were dictated by the demands of the middle class for social change. They became the philosophic justification of nineteenth-century British Liberalism, its method of criticizing traditional institutions, by their consequences in individual pleasures

and pains. They provided a rational basis for a society of laissez-faire and free competition, the trust in the reason of the common man.”<sup>11</sup>

There is a second version of how the Enlightenment Project endorsed liberal culture. *Philosophes* such as Voltaire, Diderot, d’Alembert, and the physiocrats (Gournay, Quesnay, Turgot, and Dupont de Nemours) took their cue from Bacon. This latter group advocated not only the idea of the conquest of nature but also the idea of a social technology to solve all social and political problems. They equated this program with a powerful central government unencumbered by the Church, the courts, or legislative bodies. That is, they eschewed limited government. This second version is also avowedly liberal, but it would despite itself evolve into totalitarianism.

The clearest example of this is to be found in Helvétius’ *De l’Esprit* (1758). Starting with Locke’s epistemological claim that all knowledge originates in experience and that the human mind at birth is a tabula rasa, Helvétius goes on to embrace an extreme form of environmental determinism. This should remind us of Rawls’ veil of ignorance. All differences in beliefs, attitudes, values, and so forth are solely the result of historical and environmental accident.<sup>12</sup> From this, it was concluded that all human beings were fundamentally identical and therefore equal. All forms of social hierarchy, privilege, and differences in power and influence were deemed the result of historical accident and denounced as unjust. In their place was substituted the notion that all individuals, when properly educated, were equally competent judges. Participatory democracy is therefore the only form of government compatible with the fundamental equality of human nature.

11. Randall, *The Career of Philosophy*, p. 924.

12. “Even the willingness to make an effort, to try, and so to be deserving in the ordinary sense is itself dependent upon happy family and social circumstances.” John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 74.

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What Helvétius did not see was that his reading of Locke was also compatible with totalitarianism. First, if there were basic truths about human nature that dictated specific social arrangements then why should these practices not be forthwith instituted by a dictatorial and enlightened elite? Further, the people were to be trusted only if they were properly educated and had undergone a deprogramming therapy that cleansed them of the misperceptions from which they suffered as the result of previous oppressive governments. Allowing the people to debate public policy issues in their current state of mind ran the risk of their intellectual exploitation by scoundrels. It might be necessary to have a temporary dictatorship until the therapeutic process was completed, and even then political debate could be dispensed with in favor of scientific discussion among the informed experts followed by public reeducation.

Environmental determinism had also to be qualified by and made compatible with the assumption that a secularized natural law would continue to discover that all human beings shared the same basic goals. When these goals had been presumed to originate with God, as was the case in Locke and traditional natural law, it was not necessary to explain (1) why there were goals in the first place, (2) why these goals were common and universal to all human beings, and (3) why these goals could harmoniously coexist both within the same individual and among an entire community. Moreover, within traditional theologically based versions of natural law some consideration had been given to the inner conflicts we all experience and to potential social conflicts. Perfect justice was to be achieved in the next life, so that all we could hope for in this world was a harmony of private interests. When natural law is shorn of its theological framework, it becomes problematic why human beings should be believed to have natural goals at all, especially given a commitment to strong environmental determinism. It also becomes problematic to assume that if there were goals, they would

be common to all human beings, especially in the presence of differing histories. Finally, and most important, how can there be scientific public policy and social reconstruction unless there is some natural harmony or guarantee of a lack of ultimate conflict?

Once the belief in God is surrendered, the adherence to a secularized natural law doctrine requires some substitute to guarantee the convergence toward a common interest. The logic of the argument will inevitably drive theorists to the conclusion that there must be a common or group interest that subsumes all of the individual interests so that ultimate fulfillment on the part of the individual can be achieved only within some absolute social and political framework. Modern totalitarianism is thus born. In that pivotal work, *What Is the Third Estate?*, the Abbe Sieyes had asserted that the nation “is prior to everything. It is the source of everything. . . . its will is always the supreme law.”

Totalitarian democracy substitutes the idea of a collective good for the traditional idea of a harmony of interests. At the same time, it seemingly solves one of the serious problems of the new secularized natural law. Instead of having to establish that each individual has a built-in goal (as opposed to a historically acquired one) and instead of having to prove that each individual’s natural goal is compatible with those of every other individual, the new totalitarian has merely to establish what the common goal is. Establishing this common goal was never done in any objective or scientific way, despite the scientific pretensions of the age. Instead, each and every revolutionary individual or faction was free to propose whatever was wanted.

The second version of the Enlightenment Project leads to a transformation of the Lockean conception of rights. In its Enlightenment Project form, the ends are not rights; rather, rights are means to the achievement of the ends. As such, rights are only *prima facie*, may be overridden, and may be possessed by any entity, not only individual human beings. Such rights can be welfare

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rights, that is, they may be such that others have a positive obligation to provide such goods, benefits or means. What distinguishes one social philosopher from another is (1) whether rights are understood to be absolute or prima facie, (2) the content of the rights, and (3) the lexical ordering of those rights.

All of the difficulties we have enumerated in the Enlightenment Project had been foreseen. Perhaps the most insightful critic of this kind of egalitarianism was David Hume. In one prescient paragraph in the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*,<sup>13</sup> Hume stated the entire case against it. First, there was no agreement on what things should be equalized; that is, there was no consensus on which universal facts about human nature entailed normative social arrangements. Second, given that lack of agreement, demands for equality would remain nothing more than rhetorical masks for private political agendas. Third, even if it were possible to redistribute everything so that we all started out equal, differences in ability and circumstances (e.g., luck) would soon lead to inequalities. Fourth, and finally, to overcome the inegalitarian recidivism, it would be necessary to maintain the most all-encompassing social tyranny.

Notice that Hume is not objecting to equality before the law or equality of opportunity, forms of equality he supported. He supported them because they were part and parcel of a market economy in a commercial republic, that is, what we have called liberal culture. What he objected to was the allegedly scientific open-ended egalitarianism of the Enlightenment Project. Something new was also introduced in Hume's argument. The point of encouraging equality of opportunity is to maximize growth and the creation of greater opportunities, economic and otherwise, for everyone. The secular concern for growth has replaced the Reformation notion of doing God's work.

13. David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 194.

Nor was Hume alone in making such objections. Diderot dissented from Helvétius on the grounds that there were innate differences of ability as well as environmental influences. Probably neither the advocates of the Enlightenment Project nor their critics envisioned a genetic engineering that could presumably equalize genetic makeup.

Both Montesquieu and Edmund Burke shared one of Hume's concerns, the threat of tyranny. Both had maintained that some forms of social and economic hierarchy were a defense against tyranny, understood as the existence of a social order in which there were no intermediate institutions between isolated individuals and an all-powerful government needed to preserve the equality of the isolated individuals. This concern for a potential conflict between liberty and equality would resurface in the next century.

Rousseau represented an important and often overlooked and misunderstood countercurrent to the Enlightenment Project. Against the denial of the existence of a moral self, Rousseau reasserted it. Essentially he revived the Christian conception of the dignity of the individual soul but in a secular way. The kind of equality that counted, for him, was moral equality. He did recognize that this kind of equality could be threatened by economic inequality (*Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* in 1754) and in the *Social Contract* of 1762, where he urged that no one be "so rich as to be able to buy another, and none so poor as to have to sell himself."<sup>14</sup> However, he did not press for equality of political representation nor did he advocate the abolition of private property. Rather, he urged that there be something like an equal participation in the public good (general will).

Rousseau's views were developed by Kant into the notion of

14. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Social Contract," in *Political Writings of J. J. Rousseau*, edited by C. E. Vaughan (Cambridge, 1915), 2 vols.

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autonomy and later by Hegel in the much more sophisticated reconciliation of civil society with the notion of a state. These views are reflected both in the current advocacy of self-respect and in the advocacy of self-esteem, about which we shall have more to say later. Even Bentham's utilitarian notion that each individual is to count as one and no more than one is another secular expression of this notion meant to cohabit the same space with the notion that individuals are only rational maximizers.

The French Revolution reflected all of the competing conceptions of equality we have identified. *The Declaration of Rights* of 1789 rejected privileges and opportunities based on birth and advocated equality of opportunity (access to public office should depend only on "virtues and talents"). It abolished feudalism, provided for equality of rights, equality before the law, equality of opportunity (abolished the inheritance of rank and public office), equality of punishment, equality of taxation. The abolition of slavery was proclaimed in 1794. All of this reflected the relative egalitarianism associated with a commercial republic, and this in turn reflected a secularized version of the Protestant Reformation within a market economy.

What was the perceived relationship between political equality and economic equality? There was no call for universal suffrage (not to be confused with equality before the law). The assumption was that political rights depended on achieving a certain minimal economic standing (property qualification).

"Grachus" Babeuf, on the other hand, whose first name is meant to remind us of the revolt led by the Gracchi brothers in ancient Rome, advocated an absolute equality. When informed that some people were more talented than others, he suggested that their right hands be cut off to equalize performance! He was the mastermind behind the Conspiracy of the Equals, designed to bring about total equality of outcome. He was executed in 1797.

## NINETEENTH CENTURY

Nineteenth-century socialist thought represents a challenge to eighteenth-century thought on equality. The dominant eighteenth-century view was that political equality should reflect economic status. Specifically, those who were economically self-sufficient or capable of competing for economic benefits should be given political equality (equality of opportunity to compete, equality before the law, suffrage). Those who had to work for others in a fashion reminiscent of feudalism were deemed not self-sufficient. Nineteenth-century socialist thought, by and large, maintained that workers who appeared lacking in self-sufficiency were denied the opportunity to become self-sufficient. Economic inequality was held to be the fundamental inequality in that it was instrumental to all other forms of inequality (power, prestige, self-regard, self-sufficiency, etc.).

The so-called utopian socialists, including J. S. Mill, advocated ending the inequality of a society divided between employers and employees by making everyone a potential entrepreneur. To achieve this end, it would be necessary to provide the conditions for a minimally good life understood as the conditions necessary to render one self-sufficient—such as free public education. There is no notion here of the equality of outcome. It is thus a form of relative egalitarianism, only now it was recognized that in an industrial and commercial market economy, some form of economic redistribution might be necessary.

Marxists, on the other hand, sought to collapse the distinction between employer and employee by doing away with private property and entrepreneurship altogether. A collective good was to be realized in a planned and centrally organized economy. However, for Marx, true equality meant the advent of a classless society, not equality of income or function. “The real content of the proletarian demand for equality is the *abolition of classes*. Any demand for equal-



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ity which goes beyond that, of necessity passes into absurdity.”<sup>15</sup> There is no sentimental notion of equality in Marx, rather, a form of absolute egalitarianism. The workers would clearly not be equal to the planners, but it was assumed that this appearance of inequality would not be onerous or invidious in light of the collective good. Somehow or other differences of function would not translate into differences of status in light of the collective good.

The increasing call for an absolute equality, now understood as the call for the recognition of a collective good that subsumed the individual good, raised the same alarm that it had in the eighteenth century. Critics such as Tocqueville, Mill, and Burckhardt warned of a conflict between equality and liberty. The belief in and advocacy of a collective good in which individual good is subsumed do not see the necessity for preserving liberty. Rather they insist on controlling any institution and practice that contributes to individual fulfillment within the collective good. Defenders of liberty justify removing or relaxing external constraints because they presume that there is some kind of basic internal psychological need for something like personal autonomy. The defenders of liberty are reasserting in secular fashion the Christian doctrine of the dignity of the individual soul. This is what is behind J. S. Mill’s defense of individuality.

The argument in favor of liberty and against absolute equality is sometimes presented as an efficiency argument. That is, the advocacy of economic equality in any absolute sense would lead to a severe net loss in economic benefits for all. Let us exhibit this loss.

In the following cases the value of the dollar and the inflation rate remain the same, and the number represents the annual income in U.S. dollars.

15. Karl Marx, *Anti-Dühring*, quoted from Abernethy, *The Idea of Equality*, pp. 199–200.

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<i>Society A</i>	<i>Society B<sub>1</sub></i>	<i>Society C</i>	<i>Society B<sub>2</sub></i>
10% earn >\$1,000,000	10% earn \$100,000	10% earn \$5,000,000	100% earn \$250
70% earn \$50,000	70% earn \$49,000	70% earn \$1,000,000	
20% earn \$20,000	20% earn \$22,000	20% earn \$100,000	

The efficiency argument goes something like this. Society A represents where we are now. Society B<sub>1</sub> represents where we would be if current proposals for increasing the welfare state and redistributing income were put into effect. Society B<sub>2</sub> represents where we would be if absolute equality were imposed and maintained. Society C represents where we would be if we did away completely with income transfer schemes. Note that in Society C, the bottom 20 percent are much better off than they were in Society A in an absolute sense (remember the value or purchasing power of the dollar remains the same) but the gap between them and the middle 70 percent has grown wider. It might be pointed out that the numbers here are exaggerated. Even so, the point remains the same.

Defenders of absolute equality relative to a collective good must inevitably make the claim that even if there were a net loss of economic benefits, the noneconomic social benefits (e.g., the lack of envy) would far outweigh that loss. It has also been suggested that if the wealthy voluntarily chose to redistribute their wealth to the less wealthy or to the poor, there would be no loss of wealth and a lot less misery as well as more happiness. However, this suggestion fails to take into account that such a voluntary redistribution would affect future productivity. For example, a poor person is likely to spend the boon on immediate gratification whereas the wealthy person might reinvest that surplus in creating new industries and jobs. In fact three quarters of the wealth of the wealthiest individuals is invested in such ventures.

The argument in favor of liberty and against absolute equality is otherwise presented as an argument in favor of freedom or autonomy (understood here as self-rule). Even if there were no net eco-

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conomic loss, there would be an end to freedom of speech and eventually freedom of thought. We would see the triumph of mediocrity or a narrow public opinion imposing the same capricious and arbitrary standards on everything and everyone. These things are considered good because they are instrumental to self-expression and personal autonomy. For theorists like Mill, freedom trumps efficiency, and that is why he sometimes sounds like an absolute egalitarian. On the other hand, freedom also trumps equality, and in this respect we have returned to relative egalitarianism. Autonomy is an intrinsic end for relative egalitarians. Autonomy and liberty are not intrinsic ends for absolute egalitarians.

## PRESENT

It is fair to say that the present situation of those who live in a liberal culture may be described as follows. We ignore for the sake of argument those who are unalterably opposed to liberal culture. Moreover, all those who are a party to this debate advocate relative equality, not absolute equality. For those of us who live in a liberal culture, we seem committed to the technological project, to the recognition of a free market economy as the best means for achieving it, to some notion of limited government as the best way to service the market economy, to the idea that government stays limited if there is the rule of law and some conception of rights. Where disagreements arise, they have arisen because of conflicting views of the human predicament. These conflicting views of the human predicament are reflected not only in different ideas about the status of rights and the meaning of the rule of law but also in conflicting views about equality. As we have already said, current disagreements about equality as a normative concept center on (1) factual claims about the specific sense or senses in which human beings are identical, (2) what constitutes relevant special treatment, that is, which specific senses carry normative weight, and (3) factual

claims about which public policies are consistent and coherent with and effective in ensuring the relevant special treatment.

Let us begin with fundamental disagreements about the human predicament. I am going to present this as a disagreement between two poles with the recognition that there are intermediate positions. However, the intermediate positions are intelligible only because they operate between the two poles.

Advocates of the first pole (conception of equality that originated in Christianity and is represented in a modern secular context by Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, and Mill among others) maintain that there is some sense in which human beings are internally free and capable of being autonomous. This is the fundamental truth about human beings. As potentially free and autonomous beings, we have no specific goal to achieve or specific object that we need to possess. What is most important is the achievement of self-respect. Self-respect is not something that can be given from the outside. It is, instead, the recognition that we are internally capable of ruling ourselves and running our own lives. Personal autonomy is the ultimate good, and it is an individual possession. There is no such thing as a collective good. One of the important features about self-respect is that those who possess it want recognition from others who also possess it. It is this need for recognition (Hegel's argument) that obligates us to help others achieve personal autonomy and the self-respect that comes with it. Autonomy is not part of a zero-sum game, so that anyone's having it is not going to detract from others' having it. If anything, it thrives best in an infinitely expanding social universe.

Wealth is important not as an end in itself nor as a means to consumerism but because it serves as the means for personal accomplishment. Wealth maximization and efficiency considerations are important because in the end we need to know if such policies are maximizing opportunities for more and more people to become autonomous. Public policies that redistribute wealth are permissible

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to the extent that they ultimately promote autonomy. For example, equality before the law may require public legal aid schemes (e.g., Justice Black in *Griffin v. Illinois* in 1956) to ensure that everyone is properly represented in legal proceedings and not only those who can afford it. Equality of opportunity might require free public education to ensure that everyone is as well prepared to compete as is feasible. Notice that we said “might.” All of these policies must be justified on the grounds that they promote autonomy and that they are efficient (vouchers might be more effective than government-run schools, mandatory legal insurance might be better than legal aid for most people, etc.) as well as not diminishing resources for other spheres in which human autonomy is important. It is always relevant to ask of any public policy if it works, if it is the only or best way to achieve our end, and whether it conflicts with other legitimate ends. Redistribution is not a priori objectionable, but the redistribution must be judged on whether it promotes autonomy as well as efficiency.

To sum up this first pole, autonomy (1) does not exist in degrees, (2) is not a zero-sum social game, (3) requires a minimum of social support that focuses on internal character, and (4) avoids interminable disputes about which lifestyles are better or more fulfilling.

One intermediate position worth identifying is the following. Human beings have neither a telos nor any ontologically meaningful sense of internal freedom. Human beings are individual bundles of needs and desires determined purely by human physiology (there is neither a unique psychological nor a spiritual domain). There is no objective reason or argument for why these needs ought to be equally satisfied. If we engage in policies of redistribution, the only reason is to maximize satisfactions through the creation of an expanding economic pie. The only consideration is efficiency.

Advocates of a second pole reflect the Enlightenment Project. They deny the existence of freedom in the sense of autonomy. They agree that human beings are individual bundles of needs and

desires determined by human physiology. However, they also maintain that there is a special psychological need, namely, the need for fulfillment or self-esteem. We shall talk about self-esteem, but a few words on the fulfillment version are in order. Fulfillment sounds vaguely teleological and would have to be both identified and justified. Advocates of fulfillment also put more stress on the redistribution of wealth and tend not to want to get too involved in directing how people fulfill themselves.

Self-esteem is the much more interesting case. To have self-esteem is to have a positive self-image, and this self-image is a product of external environmental circumstances. If others look upon us as failures, as sociopaths, losers, or inferior, then our self-image suffers, we experience a deprivation of self-esteem, and a basic psychological need is not being met. Self-esteem is, therefore, by its very nature a relative concept.

Advocates of the second pole usually direct all of their criticism against the intermediate position and its emphasis on efficiency. Efficiency is equated with mere wealth maximization and the ignoring of the importance of self-esteem. One interesting example of this is Michael Young's claim, in *Rise of the Meritocracy*, that in a purely maximization and efficiency-driven system there will always be more losers than winners. In fact, the more honest, effective, and efficient the purely meritocratic system is, the more individuals will know they have no one to blame but themselves. The same sort of consequences are said to be implied by *The Bell Curve*. The end result will be enormous hostility.

Consequently, advocates of the second pole insist on the need for public policies that promote self-esteem. Such public policies involve at least two dimensions. First, there is the never-disappearing wealth gap that needs to be minimized; second, equal recognition must be given to all forms of human endeavor and not just to technology, the life of the mind, and so-called high-brow culture. Moreover, there is no final and definitive list of what has to be

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done to reach and preserve equality of self-esteem. This will always vary with changing circumstances. Finally, there is the recognition that to achieve or maintain equality it will be necessary to treat people unequally. As R. N. Tawney pointed out, the “more anxiously a society endeavours to secure equality of consideration for all its members, the greater will be the differentiation of treatment which . . . it accords to the special needs of different groups and individuals among them.”<sup>16</sup> This will create a new set of privileges or inequalities, but these are said to be defensible given some ideal such as self-esteem. So, for example, affirmative action is alleged to be a justifiable form of reverse discrimination designed to secure equal rights for a group.

To sum up the second pole, advocates of the maximum fulfillment of potential or of self-esteem are (1) logically driven to equality of outcome, however outcome is defined, (2) are committed to maximum support, (3) must recognize that they are involved in a zero-sum game given the presence of finite resources, and (4) might be forced to define the maximization of human talent in terms of some conception of the social good (collectivist resolution).

Critics of the second pole generally repeat one or more of the criticisms made long ago by Hume: there is no consensus on what these subtle psychological needs are (e.g., Amartya Sen<sup>17</sup>); or they are the mere expression of private political agendas in a democratic context (e.g., envy syndrome or some other select list), that is, equality is a reflection of a larger social philosophy; whenever the equalization policies are put into effect, human beings will find some way to make the system unequal again (a point recognized by the advocates of the second pole, which is exactly why they claim that their job is never done); or, finally, we shall end up with a new

16. R. N. Tawney, *Equality* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1952), p. 39.

17. Amartya Sen, *Inequality Reexamined* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

class of tyrants who are the ones claiming to make all the adjustments on some social-scientific basis.

A good deal of contemporary discussion focuses on the people at the bottom, or what is called the *underclass*, the *less well off*, or the *disadvantaged*. The choice of descriptive term itself often reflects a preset analysis of these people. Part of the explanation for this focus is the religious heritage of the dignity of the human individual, even in a secular age. Some employ this focus because they believe that the existence of the poor discredits liberal culture or discredits the current policies toward the poor or those invested with the authority (as well as power and prestige) to deal with those issues. Some focus on the poor because their existence reflects wasted talent that impoverishes us all in a market economy. Some maintain this focus because it reflects the failure to promote autonomy in a segment of the community. It is this focus that reveals the conflicting estimates of appropriate public policy that flow from conflicting diagnoses of the problem. The issues of equality and poverty then are closely linked.

We conclude by calling attention to an important criticism of the second pole that did not appear in Hume. A contemporary advocate of the first pole, Michael Oakeshott in his essay *The Masses in Representative Democracy*, makes it. Although he does not specifically mention self-esteem, Oakeshott would identify the claims made on its behalf as examples of the social pathology of what he calls the *anti-individual*. Within liberal culture going back as far as the Renaissance and the Reformation, many people have not made the transition to individuality. There is a complicated history behind this, but what is important is to recognize that the most serious problem within modern liberal societies is the presence of the anti-individual. Being an anti-individual is a state of mind. It is not directly correlated with income, intelligence, or how articulate you are. Some anti-individuals are highly intelligent. Either unaware of or lacking faith in their ability to exercise self-discipline, the anti-



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individual seeks escape into the collective identity of communities insulated from the challenge of opportunity. These are people focused on avoiding failure rather than on achieving success. Phenomenologically speaking, the anti-individual can identify herself or himself by feelings of envy, resentment, self-distrust, victimization, and self-pity—in short, an inferiority complex.

What really inhibits these people is not a lack of opportunity, not a lack of political rights, and not a lack of resources but a character defect, a moral inadequacy. Having little or no sense of individuality they are incapable of loving what is best in themselves. What they substitute for love of self, others, and family is loyalty to a mythical community. Instead of an umpire they want a leader, and they conceive of such leaders as protectors who relieve them of all responsibility. This is what makes their sense of community pathological. What they end up with are leaders who are their mirror image: leaders who are themselves anti-individuals and who seek to control others because they cannot control themselves, who seek the emasculation of autonomous individuals, who prize equality and not competition. In place of a market economy and limited government, we get economic and political tyranny.