

EQUALITY, LIBERTY AND VARIETY

Interview with John Vaizey

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JOHN VAIZEY¹ The more I've thought about equality, the more I've found myself in a somewhat confused position. I suppose it's true to say that if I were put up against a wall and told I was going to be shot – which often happens to people who support equality, I suppose – I think I would ultimately say I was an egalitarian. But on the other hand the arguments for equality do seem to me to be extremely weak; that is to say, I can't really see any kind of abstract ideas which are overwhelmingly persuasive, and it seems to me that all the practical steps on the road towards equality quarrel with all sorts of things that I think I believe in, like freedom and variety and just sheer enjoyment of life. So the question I'd like to ask you, Isaiah Berlin, is really: Why equality?

ISAIAH BERLIN This is a very interesting question. There are people – philosophers among them, particularly contemporary philosophers, whom I much respect – who think that equality is somehow connected with or even entailed by the very notion of rationality. On this I think what they think is that the proposition that people who are similar to each other in relevant respects should be treated similarly in similar situations is a rational proposition, because if you don't treat them like that then a reason needs to be given, whereas if you do treat them like that no reason

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needs to be given. But that doesn't seem to me to be very cogent. Any rule that is a rule at all presumably brooks no exceptions, and therefore even if I utter some totally inegalitarian rule such as that men with red hair should all be imprisoned, whereas people with hair of another colour should remain free, this might not be rational, but it would be a rule and everybody under that rule would be treated equally. And this doesn't appear to me therefore to establish a connection between rationality and equality as such. What *I* should say is that equality is one of the ultimate ends of men: it just seems to me an ideal as such, this is something which people go for.

There are certain ultimate human ends which, because they are ends, don't require defence, don't require justification. Supposing I say to you: Why love? Why art? Why go on living? Only very sophisticated people want justification and defence of these things. Of course, when they clash, as some values do, then people become puzzled and wonder whether there are any criteria or rules in terms of which they can decide which values to implement. But it seems to me that equality is one of these direct ends-in-themselves.

Let me tell you what I mean. If there is a cake and there are seven children, the natural thing, you'll be told, is to give each child one-seventh of the cake and not to give six of the children a bit of cake and the seventh child none at all. Why? Why shouldn't you ...? – as you say, variety. Why wouldn't it be more exciting to have a world in which you never knew what would happen next? Sometimes you'd get the whole cake, sometimes you'd get no cake, sometimes you'd get a third of the cake. The romantics thought like this. Why should one have a dreary world in which rules operate, in which everybody is treated alike, which is essentially uniform and dull and monotonous and symmetrical? Far better is a world of a Nietzschean kind in which the strong bully the weak, in which unexpected things happen, in which romantic lunges occur to the right and to the left, and so on. Well, I'm not defending the Nietzschean world: I prefer the egalitarian world; I'm an egalitarian like you, I don't think we'll quarrel about that. But if you say: 'Why is it the case that people think: Seven children, a cake, the natural thing if you know no more about the children than that they are children and that they all like cake – that it is natural to give them one-seventh of the cake and not to produce an unequal distribu-

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tion?', it seems to me that it's simply because it is one of the ends which men pursue as such. That's what's meant by fairness, that's what's meant by equality, this is one of the ultimate goals of men; they've always wanted it at all times – I suspect there always have been men who've regarded that as a goal worth striving for. We're always discontented when it is in some way flouted.

VAIZEY The red-headed man always crops up in discussions of equality. I mean, I just have this vision of ginger-haired people suddenly turning up and saying 'Behold, I'm ginger-haired; why should you discriminate against ginger-haired people?' I don't think inequality is actually like that. The more I think about it – I usually think, when you see what seems to you in the abstract a case of inequality, there's usually a reason for it. That is to say, there's always been discrimination against women except in very few societies and you can see perfectly well why that should have been. There's been discrimination against certain racial groups, either a majority or a minority, but you can again see reasons for that, you can see reasons why the upper classes should oppress the lower classes. I don't think it's a matter of chance that society's unequal. It seems to me part of one's understanding of the way that society actually works that there should be some kind of distinction between people. What I find interesting is: Where did the idea of equality come from? Because it seems to me an extremely abstract notion.

BERLIN Well, you've really said two things – if I might say something about both. First of all this business about the inequalities of society and the reasons for them. Of course there are reasons for them, or at least causes of them, certainly. But what people who believe in equality object to is that the reasons are invalid, of course; that is to say, they are usually based on some sort of ignorance or perversion of fact. If you find a society in which women, for example, are treated differently from men, you are perfectly allowed to ask the question: Why should women be differently treated from men? And then you will discover that they are thought to be stupider or weaker or more emotional or less rational or less capable of doing various things which the society needs for its welfare; and then it becomes incumbent on the people who say that to give some evidence for it, and the people

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who believe in equality will of course maintain that this is untrue, this is ignorance, prejudice, an irrational objection of some kind. Similarly with men with red hair. If men with red hair are treated unequally the argument against treating them unequally is that red hair is not relevant to the purposes for which men are employed in this or that trade, in this or that society, for which men exist, if there is such a purpose, and so on. So that once you can produce an argument for a certain degree of inequality – I think even egalitarians are bound to accept some: if you have any human organisation it's quite clear that different people will perform different tasks and some of them will be obliged to give orders to others, except in a totally anarchist society of saintly monks, as it were, where perhaps this isn't necessary; but in normal human society some kind of hierarchy in some degree is bound to happen, but for this some kind of reason must be given, namely that the goal to be achieved – this kind of life or that kind of life, whatever may be regarded as the desirable purpose of that society – cannot, it is alleged, be achieved in any other way, and if people are persuaded of that then they will accept it, and this is true even of a Marxist or any other system. So that I'm not sure that I agree with the proposition that all societies are bound to be unequal, that there are always reasons for them, and therefore that the ideal of equality as such is Utopian, or impossible to achieve. It's Utopian only if you want to achieve nothing but equality. If you want to achieve other ends as well then of course you will be in a position to say that if certain ends cannot be achieved simultaneously – for example total liberty and total equality, whatever that may mean, cannot be achieved in the same place at the same time among the same persons – then you will have to strike some kind of compromise, and the kind of arguments which will then occur will be whether the amount of equality which has been achieved is as great as can be achieved compatibly with the amount of liberty which is thought desirable. And this is the question of arranging things in such a way that there isn't too little of either.

VAIZEY You say that equality isn't necessarily Utopian, that is to say that you could imagine a society which was egalitarian in some fundamental sense and which functioned. I used to think I thought that; I'm not sure that I do really think that. And it isn't, surely, true to say that the arguments for inequality spring entirely from

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ignorance or perversion of facts. There are after all distinguished thinkers – particularly in the nineteenth century – who’ve consciously defended inequality as a necessary condition not only of the continuation of human society but of the fulfilment of each individual person.

BERLIN Well, I’m sorry, I didn’t want to say that all forms of inequality are undesirable, that total equality is achievable. Total equality is of course Utopian. I was saying only that valid objections to inequality are usually based, or ought to be based, on some sort of ignorance, perversion of fact. But of course even the omniscient being who knew all the facts, if you can imagine such a being, might still be in favour of some degree of inequality because there were other goals to achieve. Total equality and total liberty are certainly not compatible with each other, and therefore even in the most ideal society, even in the most democratic possible society, even in the society in which people believed in equality to the maximum degree possible in a rational society, or a society organised to achieve normal human goals, not to sacrifice any of them, even in such a society there would be some degree of inequality; that I wouldn’t deny. I mean, the argument is very simple. You say: Complete liberty of course means that everyone is allowed to do what they like; but if everyone is allowed to do what they like the pike will eat the carp, bullies will crush the weak. Therefore they have to be restrained. Once they have to be restrained, some degree of restraint on liberty has to be imposed. If you have absolute equality you have very little liberty indeed, because nobody is allowed to rise beyond a certain level for fear that everyone may not be able to rise to that level. Therefore you always have this uncomfortable compromise, some kind of rather difficult equilibrium, some sort of unstable equilibrium which constantly has to be kept in being, between so much equality and so much liberty, so that neither of these things falls too far. When it falls too far then objections can validly be put. Then you say: A human society which is too unequal, a human society which is too unfree, is a bad society.

But wait, you asked a question about when did equality really begin, which is the second question you asked.

VAIZEY That’s absolutely so.

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BERLIN Well, I don't – it's quite interesting, I don't know, I'm – this is subject to fearful error. The first egalitarian I know about, real egalitarian, was the Stoic Zeno just at the end of the fourth century BC, beginning of the third. We haven't got the full text of his political work; there is a work on the State which he apparently wrote, but all we have is small fragments. But even from these fragments we know that he thought that the State ought to be abolished, that there ought to be no exports or imports, no money, no law courts, that men and women should wear the same clothes, that everyone should pursue the same habits, and in fact that all these artificial inventions which are called culture and civilisation ought to be abolished in favour of an absolutely free and permissive system of following nature. Following nature meant doing anything that nature incited you to do, because he believed in the essential rationality of nature and that if men were natural they would be rational, and if they were rational nobody would do anything which would either collide with anybody else or form collisions within himself.

VAIZEY That seems to me to be absolutely dominant in some aspects of eighteenth-century thought. If you took, for example, Adam Smith and the origins of *laissez-faire*, or the early works of Bentham on utilitarianism, there's very much that sort of thought, isn't there, implicit in what they are saying?

BERLIN Well yes, Bentham said: Each man to count for one, and no man to count for more than one.² And you may say: Why? Why shouldn't some men count for two? John Stuart Mill, who wanted to be egalitarian, was fearfully troubled by this. He thought that the uneducated might do irrational things and produce a state of affairs which would diminish human happiness, and toyed with the idea of giving educated persons more votes than the uneducated. He didn't, I think, do this very comfortably, but at the same time he was much more aware of the conflict of values – for example the conflict of the ultimate end of treating all men as equal, which

² 'Everybody to count for one, nobody for more than one' was attributed to Bentham by J. S. Mill in *Utilitarianism*, chapter 5 (near the end): *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. J. M. Robson (Toronto/London, 1981–), vol. 10 (1969), p. 257.

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is an old Stoic-Christian ideal, really – conflict of that with the necessity for creating a certain kind of life in which as many people would realise as many of their purposes as possible. And this kind of life could be arranged only by people who understood how to do things – both morally, intellectually and technologically educated – and these persons would surely be more expert at doing these things than the ignorant. And he could never, I think – for the rest of his life he couldn't quite reconcile a strong urge towards equality and a strong belief in expertise.

VAIZEY After all, in his time John Stuart Mill was an extreme radical (BERLIN Yes) and certainly argued consistently for enormous changes in the political and social structure of England as he knew it. (BERLIN Surely.) And his family after all had come from the same background of deep, deep criticism of the existing social framework. And of course it's this tradition in which we now live. (BERLIN Yes.) But of course in the nineteenth century there were distinguished philosophers who argued passionately against egalitarianism, who argued passionately that a decent human life depended upon the fact that people were unequal, even in fact that some people were slaves and therefore ceased as it were to be really people. Now in this century it always seems to me that people like T. S. Eliot, who believed (BERLIN Certainly) – argued for inequality, they seem to me to be pretty milk-and-water inequality. But I long to know what the sort of passionate believer in reaction would actually say, what their argument was.

BERLIN Yes. Well, for example, you say philosophers in the nineteenth century. Who does one think of? Not professional philosophers so much, perhaps. Carlyle (VAIZEY Carlyle, yes) is quite a good example. If you read Carlyle's essay on 'The Nigger Question' you will find that to be one of the most violent anti-egalitarian treatises ever written. His whole work is shot through with hatred of equality. He once congratulated the Russian revolutionary Herzen, who on the whole was a believer in equality, on the splendour of the Russian character. The great merit of the Russians, he said to him, was their capacity for obedience. It didn't please Herzen very much. Why did Carlyle dislike equality? I don't know, it's very difficult to be psychologically certain of what people in the past have thought.

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The impression he makes is that he dislikes uniformity, dislikes commercialism, which he thinks has some sort of tendency to depress people into some sort of dreary conformity, that he has a romantic temperament, that he likes variety, that he likes passion, that he thinks that some people are vastly superior to others, that he believes in inspired leaders, that he believes in the fact that most people are inferior and should regard it as a great privilege to be allowed to be lifted by these inspired leaders to some height to which their own dreary existences, feeble minds and dry imaginations could never possibly lift them, and even if they suffer in the process it's still a privilege to be made to suffer by men of genius who mould you into something which you had never dreamt that you could become. This really comes from the Germans; it comes from people like Fichte, who believe in the same sort of thing, and is really proto-Fascism of a certain kind. It's always a little unfair to blame the terrible excesses of Fascism in the twentieth century on these thinkers, who probably perhaps didn't think in these terms. But the actual words of these people are certainly the ultimate root of this kind of thing. And if you say 'Why?', I think there always have been people who like variety, and fear that a certain form of life, above all industrial life, commercial life, conformity of any kind, somehow crushes, demeans, cribs and confines, in Mill's phrase. Mill himself had a very great desire for variety, great desire for eccentricity, great desire for individual self-expression, and believed in human beings as self-realising entities; he wasn't at all a dry statistical sort of thinker, far from it. But of course he never could go very far: at the same time he felt that the lives of a great many people ought to be made happier, that perhaps this could be done only by democratic means, that perhaps democracy wasn't an instrument which encouraged variety to that extent. And therefore, like all serious thinkers about the human condition, he was full of internal problems and puzzlement; it's when people produce great simple solutions that one begins to suspect that perhaps they don't care about humanity, and just have a fanatical pattern in their heads which they want to impose upon mankind.

VAIZEY I'm very interested to think that Carlyle should figure so largely as a reactionary thinker. I'm very pro-Carlyle because I also like the kind of variety and enjoyment of the differences between

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people. On the other hand I really find myself very much turned off by the notion of joining in some great heroic crusade, that we all sacrifice our individual lives in finding our fulfilment in some great Napoleonic figure.

BERLIN The desire for variety appears to me to be a late phenomenon in human consciousness, comparatively late. I don't know that any ancient Greek ever praised variety for its own sake. I may be mistaken, but I don't think so. I don't think anybody – perhaps there are exceptional people – in the Middle Ages ever praised variety as such. I think the old view was: To all serious questions there is only one true answer, all the other answers being false. One is good, many is bad. Life should be organised in accordance with the truth. The truth is single, universal, the same for all persons, at all times, in all places. This is a doctrine which I think is a presupposition of most thinkers at most times, certainly in the Western tradition. It was believed for hundreds of years by people who on the whole we respect and admire. Plato thought it, Aristotle thought it, Christian thinkers thought it, in the Renaissance most thinkers thought it, in the eighteenth century it was widespread, not at all among thinkers we think of as brutal or tyrannical. The very notion of variety as a good thing, monotony as a bad thing, the very notion of differences as something to be cherished ...

VAIZEY This is a romantic notion, presumably.

BERLIN Yes, and quite late, and I don't know when it starts, but I dare say it's probably the product of something like the Industrial Revolution, maybe. I don't know when it begins, really. You get whiffs of it in Montesquieu, you see; not only does he describe the variety of human conditions but he obviously rather glories in it, rather likes it. One of the reasons for which he was disapproved of by some of the stricter radicals in the eighteenth century is that they suspected that he not only described it, but thought it rather good that there should be many views and many forms of life, whereas they thought on the whole there was only one proper life for man and all other forms of life are founded upon some sort of ignorance or idleness or failure to think things out, or dust thrown

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in their eyes by a lot of knaves for the sake of retaining their own power.

VAIZEY Yet the eighteenth-century thinkers were not egalitarians (BERLIN Not at all) in that strict sense. But where did the phrase 'Liberty, Equality and Fraternity' come from? I mean, why liberty and equality and fraternity?

BERLIN Well, liberty was much discussed, of course. (VAIZEY Yes.) Equality probably comes, I suppose, from Rousseau as much as anyone, not that he was such an egalitarian as all that, because women are very unequal in Rousseau's picture; he doesn't want to give rights to women at all.

VAIZEY Keeps them down, yes.

BERLIN But still, as among men, so to speak, there is a desire for equality. I don't know who invented the phrase at all, but it was obviously something to do with extreme indignation about the behaviour of the aristocracy and the Church – privilege.

VAIZEY So would you agree with me that the first serious egalitarian is Babeuf in the French Revolution? (BERLIN Yes.) That's to say, Voltaire was not an egalitarian except in the sense that presumably he believed that the extreme arbitrariness of the royal tyranny should be controlled (BERLIN Oh of course, yes), and therefore that you should have a rational society where people knew their place, and in that sense you'd have a kind of society which was equal in some very strange political sense.

BERLIN Yes. Voltaire admired the Chinese – the rather imaginary Chinese, but still Chinese. He admired this wonderful peaceful society of wise mandarins governing the ignorant flock. And therefore thinkers like Voltaire and his younger contemporaries regarded equality as an absurd ideal. What was important was rationality, what was important was justice, what was important was civilisation, culture, which of course is the creation of small groups. For Voltaire there are only four great ages of man: Periclean Athens, the end of the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire, Renaissance Florence, and the great age

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of Louis XIV – exceedingly unequal societies, all of them: even Athens after all is founded upon rigid slave labour. And he makes no bones about that; nor does Helvétius, nor does Holbach – none of these great atheistic radicals, who detested the Church, who wanted to bring science and reason to bear upon human affairs, who wished to eliminate every form of superstition and prejudice, and believed that equality was a low ideal, probably due to the envy of the ignorant.

Now Bakunin, that's the exact opposite. Bakunin really did believe in equality and somewhere (I can't tell you where – if you press me for a reference I might not be able to supply it – but somewhere) he says that he thinks on the whole universities are not good things, because people who go to universities and acquire an education look down upon persons who do not go to the universities, and then he says, 'Well now: if we abolish universities maybe there will be fewer inventions, maybe the human intellect will not operate quite as brilliantly as it has in the past. So be it: well worth the sacrifice for the sake of human equality.' This at least is facing the issue honestly. He thinks there is a definite conflict between absolute equality in the way in which he wanted it – I mean in every respect, not only politically, not only socially but almost, I think, in matters of dress, almost in matters of ordinary daily habits ...

VAIZEY Imaginative writers, particularly novelists, on the whole, I think, tend to get classed among radical thinkers, but very few of them have actually been interested in equality, and most of their themes have been about people escaping from the condition to which humanity brought them. There's a didactic quality about egalitarian novels. Is that a fair point?

BERLIN Yes, I think it's perfectly fair, I mean, in general, novels, particularly good novels, aren't very good vehicles for the expression of simple political ideas, save in so far as they express the general texture of human existence, and of course the social ideas of the writers, and the milieu in which they live, if they are any good, get conveyed by their writings. But the deliberate propaganda in favour of equality, that I think is comparatively rare. You'll find it, I think, in Godwin's novels, for example, but they are not frightfully good novels (VAIZEY No, very bad novels) – I

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shouldn't think anyone reads them now. A very influential writer was the Russian social, and I suppose economic, thinker Chernyshevsky in the middle of the nineteenth century, who did consciously write a novel, which he knew not to be very good, called *What is to be Done?*, which describes the lives of the new people, that is, people after the Revolution. This had an enormous effect on a very great many young students.

VAIZEY Including Lenin's wife Krupskaya, didn't it?

BERLIN And Lenin himself was deeply influenced by Chernyshevsky. Second to Marx, Chernyshevsky was a thinker who had the greatest effect on him. And Chernyshevsky, who of course was exiled to Siberia for holding radical views and inciting people, as was thought, to rebellion, knew that the novel wasn't very good; he knew that – he was a comparatively modest man. And he said, 'I know it's not a great novel. It's like Godwin' – he said it himself – 'but that is useful too; it has its place.' It's a very bad novel as a novel. It's written with the deepest possible sincerity. If you can imagine something which combines the style and technique of a cheap novelette with the profoundest sincerity and absolute emotional purity of character, this is the strange work that constitutes *What is to be Done?* It's still rather moving in a very naïve way, because the author is obviously passionately devoted to the ideal of a new, clean, healthy, equal, just society as unlike as possible to the corrupt, oppressed, unjust and terrible Russian society of his time.

VAIZEY But if imaginative literature as such has not been very influenced by the ideal of equality, doesn't this tell us something about life itself? I mean, the relationship between imaginative literature and life itself is obviously immensely complex, but it does suggest that those people who are feeling most deeply about society don't find equality a tremendously moving idea, whereas, after all, we could point to a considerable number of poems and books which are about liberty, for example.

BERLIN Shelley, yes, and others. I suppose you could say that Dickens in some sense, by simply writing about the condition of the poor and the benighted, Dostoevsky in writing about the

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condition of the insulted and the oppressed, would affect their readers in the direction of greater equality; though perhaps that isn't the main object of these writers, which is simply to tell the truth as they saw it.

VAIZEY But English life has been so much – I mean, I suppose if England is remembered for anything it would be for its imaginative writers, and on the whole they've tended to be rather picaresque, I mean they've enjoyed the immense variety of human character and the changing social scene; they've not been very interested in some kind of higher ideal to which mankind should strive, with the exception, I suppose, of Milton.

BERLIN Oh, I think there's perhaps more ideology in the Victorian novel than that. But of course if they weren't interested in variety, they wouldn't write novels. (*Both laugh.*) I mean, people who want – who believe in uniformity for the sake of justice may be excellent people, but since they are not interested in the quirks of human character they are not very likely to choose the short story or the novel as their natural vehicle of expression; so I think one would expect novelists on the whole not to be rigorous egalitarians.

VAIZEY One of the things that I find interesting is that the chief enemy of egalitarians today is not the old aristocracy, either the aristocracy of birth or the aristocracy of wealth, it is the aristocracy of intellect. Where do we stand on that? How do we defend our position as saying we're egalitarians and yet we are meritocrats?

BERLIN We defend our position on the old John Stuart Millian lines. We say: If people have certain potentialities, if people have certain gifts, circumstances must be found, conditions must be found, in which they can develop these gifts to their richest extent. And there mustn't be some false keeping down of the exceptional in favour of the average. Some kind of organisation must be discovered whereby those who move fast can move fast, and those who move slowly, move slowly, and all, we hope, reach the goal at some time.

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VAIZEY But we know they won't, because society will be organised in such a way that the people whose jobs are relatively boring and tedious, and those people who therefore have low incomes as well -not therefore, but who actually do have low incomes, whose children go to the relatively disadvantaged schools – this is a sort of perpetual feature of society.

BERLIN No, I think I should be critical of that somewhat. I think on the whole it doesn't follow from the fact that jobs are tedious that they should be less well paid than jobs which are not tedious. In my young days dons, for example, even at such privileged establishments as Oxford and Cambridge, were paid far lower salaries than, for example, even civil servants of an equivalent age. Certainly at the beginning of their lives these people could very well have earned very much larger salaries if they went into other occupations, but preferred this particular life because the form of life suited them, because they liked teaching or because they liked research. And for this they made a sacrifice. And this seems to be absolutely fair, because you then have a certain equalisation, this works in favour of a certain degree of equality.

VAIZEY Now this is a very important thing, because what you are suggesting – which is something which I find is the way that I think about life – is that if you have advantages in one sphere of life then probably you ought to have disadvantages in other spheres of life. And so a man who is immensely successful at his job probably ought to have a low income, or any unhappy love life or something, and the whole thing should work its way round.

BERLIN Yes. I don't think I should demand – I don't think I've got a mystical view by which for every advantage you must somehow pay in the form of some kind of pain, so that if you are an immensely successful poet you must necessarily have, as you say, some kind of miserable emotional life, I don't think that's absolutely required. I can see that some romantics might feel that: you can't get anything except at a high price. That I don't believe in. My proposition is much more modest, and much more prosaic, if you like, which is that it isn't necessary to maintain that the intelligent should be paid more than the unintelligent, or that

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people who adore their work should be paid more for it, even if the work is important, than those who don't, and some compensation ought to be made for dullness, for drudgery, for grimness of work and so forth; hence the case for the miners.

VAIZEY I think both of us would tend to say, perhaps wrongly, that in any particular instance which comes up in current politics and current ideas we would support, on the whole, the egalitarians against the inegalitarians; but that doesn't mean that, if there was some cataclysmic revolution, we would find ourselves on the side of those who would say, 'Well, take everything away from the more fortunate, the more privileged, and give everything to the poor!'

BERLIN Any radical transformation of human life in accordance with a formula tends to crush and maim too many people, that we've discovered. If we've discovered anything from the horrors of the twentieth century, surely that lesson must have been learnt. However grave the injustices and the miseries and the errors and the vices of mankind, and don't let's minimise them, the notion that there is some kind of panacea which, if only found and above all imposed, will cure all these things – which is a thing which people have always wanted to believe in, because it's a thing which for some people alone makes life worth living, otherwise I think they'd fall into some sort of melancholy – that, I agree with you, is, I think, an extremely dangerous delusion, any notion of a final solution. In this respect I do agree with Popper, and indeed I give this basis to it.

The only thing we know for certain, it seems to me, in this life – and even that we don't know for certain – is what people actually want. We don't really know what is good for them. There are a great many dogmatic texts from Plato and the Bible onwards which say in very firm tones: Society should be organised thus and thus, basing this on some metaphysical insight or some absolute revelation. That I'm sceptical about. And all the hierarchical and the inegalitarian forms of society, or a great many of them, certainly base themselves on the fact that there is some kind of metaphysical hierarchy in nature by which we know that men are above animals, we know that the intellect is something superior to the mere body, and therefore scholars are superior to manual

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workers, therefore kings have a divine right; they have a divine right because they are kings and they must be superior to the common run of men, or something like this. These things, I think, one is very sceptical about and rejects.

The modern form of this is some kind of huge single pattern about which one feels that if only men could somehow realise that, then at last virtue, happiness, wisdom, justice would come to the earth. And since this is so important, since this is an ultimate goal, surely no sacrifice is too great in order to attain it. And so people are prepared to kill and prepared to torture and prepared to do harm to other people with calm consciences because they know that the goal, which is the only goal worth striving for, makes it worth it. It doesn't matter whether this goal is defended on rational or irrational grounds; any single goal of that kind must be treated with grave scepticism on the ground of experience, on the ground of what has happened in the past to people who have tried to impose these things, and the result. The truest statement ever made about that was made by Immanuel Kant, who said, 'Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made.' These great solutions presuppose that somehow people can in the end be fitted together like bricks in some noble building, and this seems to me to be a profound misinterpretation of what men are and what men wish to be and what men can be.

Now let me return. All we really seem to know is what men want, and all we can do is try to give them that which they want, provided it doesn't make too many other people distressed. When they get what they want, or when a large number of persons get what they crave for, they're transformed by getting what they want and now they want something else. Therefore the proposition that there is one thing which all men want, and if they want that they'll never want anything else, because they'll just want the same thing for ever and ever and ever, cannot be true. The very success in attaining what one wants creates new wants, and the success in attaining any of these creates yet new wants and so we go from age to age.

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