

THE FUTILITY OF EGALITARIANISM: SOME REFLECTIONS INSPIRED BY JULIAN LE GRAND'S *STRATEGY OF EQUALITY* DANNY FREDERICK

INTRODUCTION

In *The Strategy of Equality*,¹ Julian Le Grand points out that a major objective of government spending on the social services has always been redistribution of wealth from rich to poor. He examines the impact of public expenditure on health, education, housing and transport. His basic conclusion is that public expenditure, in almost all the forms reviewed, is distributed in favour of the higher social groups. Below, I summarise the results of his research (for more details, I refer you to the book). Although the details of these results are obviously not up-to-date (there have been many changes since 1982 when the book was published), I think the general features are of abiding significance.

HEALTH

Types of Spending. Hospitals, community health, GPs, dental services, pharmaceuticals, ophthalmic and central health services.

Principal Beneficiaries. Expenditure per ill person is greater the higher the social group. The highest socio-economic group (professionals, employers and managers) receive over 40% more than the lowest group (semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers). This is *without* taking account of facts such as that doctors spend 50% more time on consultations with patients from social class I than they do with patients from social class V.

Suggested Reasons. Poorer people make less use of health services when they need them. The middle classes are better informed about what is available, better able to obtain it and more inclined to do so. They are more aware of the benefits. It also costs them less to use a free service (less travelling time, less waiting time through use of appointments, no loss of pay). Poorer people can also be intimidated by the middle-class people who staff the service, who can be unhelpful, and who are also likely to discriminate in favour of middle-class patients to whom they can relate.

EDUCATION

Types of Spending. Nursery, primary, secondary and special schools, adult education and leisure classes, technical colleges, polytechnics and universities — all largely free or heavily subsidised — plus tax relief for private schools.

Principal Beneficiaries. The top socio-economic group receives nearly 50% more public expenditure per person in the relevant age range as the bottom group. While expenditure on compulsory edu-

cation slightly favours the lower social groups, expenditure on the post-compulsory sector strongly favours the better off (with the possible exception of student awards).

Suggested Reasons. Working-class children are unlikely to value highly the consumption benefits of education and will have less information on the investment benefits. The costs will also be higher because income foregone will be more needed in low-income families (and student awards are not available from 16-18). The parents may also be prejudiced against further or higher education for their child. Further, making higher education free makes things worse for working-class students by increasing the competition from better-qualified middle class students (whose demand for university education would be less if they had to pay for it).

HOUSING

Types of Spending. Council housing at subsidised rents, rent rebates and allowances, payments to housing associations, improvement grants for home-owners, mortgage and other home-owner tax reliefs.

Principal Beneficiaries. Direct expenditures on council housing favour the poor, as do rent allowances to private tenants. But other areas of housing expenditure are basically pro-rich, particularly the tax reliefs for owner-occupiers. As a result, overall public expenditure on housing favours the better off, with the highest income group receiving nearly twice as much as the lowest.

Suggested Reasons. The poor have a higher proportion of council tenants than the rich, and poorer tenants receive larger subsidies through the rent rebate system. However, owner-occupation is far more prevalent in the higher income groups, and the sizes of the tax reliefs increase with the tax rate faced by a household and with the size of its mortgage. The tax reliefs to owner-occupiers more than offset the pro-poor distribution of council housing.

TRANSPORT

Types of Spending. Subsidies to British Rail and to bus, underground and ferry services, grants for concessionary fares, provision of roads at no direct charge for use, tax relief on company cars.

Principal Beneficiaries. The top 20% of earners receive nearly ten times as much subsidy per household on rail travel as the poorest fifth, seventeen times as much per household on private transport, and nearly four times as much per household on coaches. Even subsidies to bus operators tend to benefit the better off, though not nearly to the same extent.

Suggested Reasons. The rich make more journeys and over longer distances than do the poor. They also make greater use of commuter services (which are substantial loss-makers because the heavy morning and evening peaks need rolling stock and a complex infrastructure which are under-used at other times). Journeys by private car per person in professional households is about three times that per person in households of semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers, and the better-off also make greater use of company cars. While concessionary fares to pensioners tend to favour the poor, those to commuters favour the better-off.

IMPLICATIONS

The strategy of achieving equality by means of expenditure on the social services has therefore failed. Julian Le Grand infers that the inequality in public expenditure is *due to* pre-existing inequalities in money income, i.e. he thinks the poor get less out of public expenditure on social services because they are poor. His remedy, then, is to replace government spending on the social services with cash hand-outs to the poor, to tackle the problem of inequality at source.

I think he is mistaken here. For one thing, I don't see inequality as a problem; but let us leave that on one side. For it seems to me that the inequalities in public expenditure, the inequalities in the use different people make of "free" public services, and the inequalities in income too, are all explained by *personal inequalities*. People differ with respect to ability, intelligence, motivation, initiative, resourcefulness, amiability, determination, laziness, thoughtfulness, care, and so on and so forth. These differences, as well as differences in inherited wealth and luck, will account for differences in income. They will also account for differences in the amount of benefit different people derive from tax-funded social services, and the amount of public expenditure they can wangle in their own direction.

Economic Notes No. 67

ISSN 0267-7164

ISBN 1 85637 325 8

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance,
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The views expressed in this publication are those of its author, and not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its Committee, Advisory Council or subscribers.

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY



Even if we totally equalised all money income, the brighter people would outdo the dimmer people with respect to:

- (a) the benefits they derive from their money income (they would spend their money more wisely and less wastefully);
- (b) the benefits they derive from their other resources (they would make better use of these resources to achieve their aims);
- (c) the non-monetary “incomes” (or perks) they could negotiate in return for the employment of their superior personal qualities.

As a result, even if money incomes were equalised, there would still be large inequalities *even in material well-being*. But that is not all.

Egalitarians like Julian Le Grand seem preoccupied with material equality. It would be easy to belittle them for this crude obsession. However, I am sure that purely material equality is not their ultimate concern. What I think they want is for everyone to enjoy the same quality of life, to achieve the same measure of spiritual fulfilment, cultural attainment, etc. Or, rather, they want “the poor” to enjoy the kind of genteel life that the middle-class egalitarians themselves enjoy. But they believe that “the poor” are excluded from this because of lack of resources. In other words, I think egalitarians see material equality as a *means*.

However, material equality will be a pretty inefficacious means in the face of personal inequalities. You can lavish as much material wealth as you like on an uncouth welfare-sponging slob, and the oaf will still be an uncouth slob — but on a grander scale. The British state already does lavish billions of pounds on such useless people and, if anything, it only makes them worse! Now I think that these people could be much better people if they were encouraged to develop and improve themselves instead of being cosseted in the life of Riley at the tax-payers’ expense; but I don’t here want to get side-tracked into that debate. The point I am making now is that there are differences in the types of lives to which different people can aspire or attain, and that inequalities in material wealth play only a small part in the explanation of these differences. For example, many people in past ages, and many people in poorer countries today, have lived or do live in a way which middle-class egalitarians would regard as fulfilling, despite being considerably *worse off* materially than “the poor” in present-day Britain whose empty, meaningless lives the egalitarians bemoan.

In short, it is not so much material wealth, as what one does with it, that determines the quality of life one leads. Giving more wealth to feckless people only means that more is used in feckless ways. In consequence, equality of income or wealth is not only an ignoble end to pursue, it is also ineffectual as a means to achieving equality of spiritual development.

I therefore draw two conclusions:

- (a) material inequality is in principle ineradicable, because no matter what social arrangements are in place, it will always tend to be the more able and motivated people who do best;
- (b) the egalitarians’ concern with material equality is misplaced, since it is not only what you *have*, but more importantly, what you *do* with what you have, that determines the kind of life that you enjoy.

LIBERTARIANISM AND PERSONAL INEQUALITIES

In general, the only equality upon which libertarians insist is equality of basic rights. There are a set of natural rights (to life, liberty and property) which *all* human beings possess, so long as they do not violate the rights of others (in which case they would forfeit their own rights). These natural, or human, rights ought to be respected. Even the uncouth welfare-sponging slob has human rights and he is entitled to demand that we respect those rights (though that may be as far as our respect for him goes).

Libertarians will therefore insist that everyone has the right to live his/her own life in his/her own way, provided he/she does not interfere with other people’s right to do the same. Recognition of everyone’s right to pursue their own course in life will generally be accompanied by acceptance of very diverse lifestyles as being equally legitimate. Libertarians can be expected to take more pleasure than egalitarian visionaries in the existence of alternative lifestyles. For example, not everyone who can afford or appreciate them is attracted to the kind of snobby pastimes favoured by the middle-class egalitarians (personally, I prefer a walk on the wild side). But this

does not mean that libertarians have *no* scope for evaluative judgement. I have myself, after all, been referring in unmistakably contemptuous tones to the lifestyle of the uncouth welfare-sponging slob. One can distinguish between differences which are *mere* lifestyle choices and differences which reflect spiritual inequalities; though I doubt if any two libertarians would entirely agree on which differences belong to which class.

The following are some fairly obvious — and, I imagine, fairly uncontentious — dimensions along which different people and lifestyles may be graded:

- (a) someone who lives by violating the rights of others, or without discharging his/her obligations, is *morally inferior*;
- (b) someone who lives imprudently or fecklessly, i.e. who uses resources inefficiently and thereby fails to achieve as many or as much of his/her aims as he/she could, is *ineffective*, a failure in his/her own terms;
- (c) someone who wantonly neglects to develop or improve him/herself, who thereby forsakes pursuits which could lead to a life which he/she would recognise as being of better quality, is *derelect*;
- (d) someone whose capacities for understanding, discrimination, enjoyment, love, etc. are limited, and who is thereby constitutionally debarred from some of the higher pursuits, is *psychologically inferior* (but not necessarily inferior in any of the other three ways just listed).

Many differences between people and lifestyles, however, are not differences of these kinds and so cannot be graded in these kinds of ways. And many differences will not be susceptible to grading at all: they are “incommensurable”. There is also room for disagreement over the cases to which gradings are applicable: where one person sees an inequality, another will see an incommensurability. And even if people agree that one of these dimensions of evaluation is applicable to a certain comparison, they may still disagree over the grading to be applied.

It may be necessary to reiterate that, no matter what conclusions we come to about gradings of different people and their lifestyles, all people have the same human rights which ought to be respected, provided they have not violated the rights of others and so forfeited their own. With the exception of moral inferiority, therefore, none of the ways of grading people can justify denying a person his/her human rights (though they may well justify avoiding him/her). Even moral inferiority does not necessarily entail diminution of human rights, since someone may be morally inferior without transgressing the rights of others. For example, someone who never performs any charitable act is morally inferior, other things being equal, to someone who does. But abstaining from charity does not violate anyone’s rights, so the abstainer has not forfeited any of his/her own rights. There are degrees of moral inferiority.

The point I just reiterated is often lost sight of. For example, the empirical evidence indicates that some races of people are psychologically inferior (in some respects, e.g. average IQ) to other races. It simply does not follow from this that people of the inferior race have less by way of human rights. Correlatively, insistence on the universality of human rights does not commit one to denying empirical evidence of psychological inferiorities.

CONCLUSION

In summary, then:

- (a) material equality is unattainable, is a base objective, and is an ineffective means of achieving equality in quality of life;
- (b) differences in quality of life depend more on personal inequalities than on material inequalities;
- (c) personal inequalities are consistent with equality of human rights;
- (d) we each have the moral right to live our own life in our own way, provided we do not violate the rights of others.

NOTE

1. Julian Le Grand, *The Strategy of Equality: Redistribution and the Social Services*, George Allen and Unwin, London. 1982.