

THE MIRAGE OF EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

Anthony Daniels

Anthony Daniels – who often uses the pen name Theodore Dalrymple – is a writer and retired prison doctor and psychiatrist. He is the author of books such as *Life at the Bottom*, *Our Culture*, *What's Left of It* and *Spoilt Rotten*. He has also written for the *British Medical Journal*, *The Times*, the *Observer*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Spectator*, and the *Salisbury Review*. This essay is a slightly edited version of a talk given at the Sixth Annual Meeting of the Property and Freedom Society, Bodrum, Turkey, in May 2011.

Political Notes No. 196
ISBN 9781856376358
ISSN 0267-7059 (Print)
ISSN 2042-2776 (Online)

 **Libertarian
Alliance**

For Life, Liberty, and Property

© 2011: Libertarian Alliance & Anthony Daniels

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

Dr Chris R. Tame (1949-2006): Founder
Dr Sean Gabb: Director
David Davis: Blogmaster & Scientific Adviser
Dr Nigel Gervas Meek: Publications Director
Mario Huet: LA Forum Listmaster
David Carr: Legal Affairs Spokesman

Suite 35
2 Lansdowne Row
Mayfair
London
W1J 6HL

Telephone: 0870 242 1712
Email: admin@libertarian.co.uk
Website: www.libertarian.co.uk

THE MIRAGE OF EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

Anthony Daniels

Feeling and meaning

A characteristic of contemporary political thought and speech is the triumph of connotation over denotation: that is to say that the feelings or emotions aroused by words have become more important, even much more important, than any meaning by which they are tethered to the world outside our minds. It is beyond my scope to suggest a reason why this should be so, but I think that it will be readily granted that, if it is so, it is a development that cannot but hamper clear thought. Of course, I recognise that this is a recurring problem in human history: it is millennia ago that Confucius suggested that the first necessary reform in a polity was to call things by their proper names.

Let us take the word ‘equality.’ I do not think that many people in public life would dare to say that they were against equality in any more than its most formal and juridical. That must mean that the word equality has a connotation so strong that it is dangerous to disassociate yourself from it, or disavow quality as a goal. A person who is in favour of equality is a good chap, a democrat and friend of the people, while someone who is against it is a bad chap, an elitist and an enemy of the people.

But it is easy to demonstrate that equality cannot in itself be desirable. For if equality were desirable in itself, it would matter little whether it were produced by a betterment or a worsening of conditions. Since I am a doctor, I will give a medical example.

Medical journals these days are obsessed by inequality; and it is an undoubted fact that, within almost all societies, rich people are healthier than poor. Most of the major medical journals argue, almost *ad nauseam*, for a closure of the health gap between the richest and poorest people.

In Britain the richest decile of the population has an infant mortality about half that of the poorest decile: that is to say, its infant mortality rate (the number of children per thousand live births who die in the first year of life) is about 3 instead of 6. Let us suppose that it were possible to reduce the infant mortality rate in both deciles by 1, such that the infant mortality rates were now 2 and 5 respectively. This would represent a widening of the ratio of infant mortality in the two deciles from 2 to 2.5, in other words to an increase in inequality. But it would be an odd person who would say that such a diminution in infant deaths was therefore undesirable, and an even odder one who would suggest that it was desirable to bring the infant mortality rate of the richest decile up to 6 so that equality might be achieved.

An equality of misery?

But, it might be argued, egalitarians no longer look so much at outcomes as at beginnings, in other words not equality of outcome but equality of opportunity, within societies if not between them. And what modern politician would dare to say that he was opposed to equality of opportunity, and believed that the idea was pernicious and actually harmful in its effect?

In addition to all the difficulties that equality of outcome as a desideratum has – a society of no opportunity would, after all, be a society of equality of opportunity – this supposed desideratum has other difficulties of its own.

It is a commonplace that people vary in their natural endowments; it is just as well that this is so, because if everyone were Mozart, no one would be Mozart. Not only do people vary at birth in their endowments, but they vary in their family, social and cultural backgrounds; and there is little doubt that some such backgrounds are more propitious, statistically speaking, for accomplishment and worldly success than others. I would hesitate to mention anything so obvious, but it is something that those who believe in equality of opportunity wish to shut their eyes to.

If one were serious about equality of opportunity, one would be a totalitarian so thoroughgoing as to make North Korea seem like a libertarian paradise. Only clones could be born and no parent could have any influence on the upbringing of his or her child, for fear of introducing inequality. Every child would receive exactly the same treatment, preferably from machines. A society of equality of opportunity would be one in which no parent could express in words or in action a preference for his own child, or to procure advantages for him or her, in case it should prejudice the chances of another child. I leave it to you to decide whether a society in which parents held no particular brief for their own children as against all the others in the world would be an attractive one. Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* would be but a beginning, not an end.

It is clear, then, that equality of opportunity is very nearly the antithesis of opportunity, for opportunity implies the incalculable. But for all practical purposes, at least at the moment, equality of opportunity is impossible and inconceivable; but just because it is impossible and inconceivable does not mean that the idea, or ideal, is without its practical effects.

Here let me say that almost any ideal is unattainable, because men are not perfect or perfectible, and because all

ideals are incomplete, human desiderata being various and often contradictory. If I say that I value politeness, I am not claiming that on each and every occasion in my life I am myself polite; moreover a world in which every human interaction were polite would be a rather insipid one. Nevertheless, it remains true that I do value politeness. Like most people, I harbour within my breast contradictory desires: that for security and excitement, for example.

Unattainable but worthwhile ideals are calls to self-control and self-cultivation. If I truly value freedom of thought, I must learn to tolerate the expression of thoughts that I detest, despise or even hate. This is an achievement rather than something that can be taken as natural.

Resentment as an excuse

Let us examine briefly, by contrast, the psychological consequences of equality of opportunity as an ideal. A friend of mine, a Russian who emigrated to the United States and then moved to England, told me that, at parties in the USA, he would always introduce himself by name and then say, 'I hate my parents, don't you?' He said that he never met anyone who demurred from this hatred, who said, 'No; actually I honour my father and my mother.'

At the least, this little experiment showed that resentment is a very common and easily aroused emotion. In fact, it is one of the very few emotions that never lets you down or disappoints – the only other I can think of is righteous indignation – and is certainly the only emotion that can last a lifetime. Righteous indignation, it is true, can be long-lasting, but is seldom lifelong; unlike resentment, it necessarily changes its focus and attaches to something new, whereas resentment can be fixated early and last until the deathbed.

Now the connection between equality of opportunity and resentment is obvious. There are very few of us who could (or would) claim that his upbringing or experience in life was so optimal that he had nothing to envy anyone else in the world. Surely everyone knows someone else who, in one respect or another, had opportunities that he did not have, and this through no fault of his own. In other words, we all have grounds for resentment. There is always someone more fortunate than we.

As I have said, resentment can, and indeed often does, last a lifetime; and this is because it has certain sour satisfactions. Among these is the satisfaction of being morally superior to the world while remaining – objectively speaking – in a grossly subordinate, inferior or undesirable position. Resentment satisfactorily explains all one own failures and failings; 'I would have been a success in some respect or other, if only I had had the same opportunities as...' And here you need only fill in the name of the person or persons more fortunately placed than you to succeed in that respect.

Resentment is a universal human emotion. It is a permanent possibility for all of us, and it takes an effort to con-

trol it. I doubt whether any reader, if he examines himself candidly, has failed ever to feel it. I suspect that those who have never felt resentment are as rare as those who have never felt pain.

Unfortunately resentment, though universal, at least potentially so, is not only a useless, but a harmful emotion: for it encourages him who feels it to dwell not on what he can do – that is to say his opportunities – but on what he cannot do, that is to say his lack of opportunities. From the moment of one's birth, there are many things one is destined not to become; how easy, and I should add pleasurable, it is to blame others for this fact, while vegetating in a soup, a minestrone, of self-pity.

Here let me quote a famous letter by the writer Anton Chekhov (as it happens a doctor), who was then aged 25, to the publisher, A.S. Suvorin:

Write a story about a young man, the son of a serf, a former shop-minder, chorister, schoolboy and student, who was brought up to fawn upon rank, to kiss priests' hands, and to worship others' thoughts, thankful for every morsel of bread, often whipped, going to his lessons without galoshes, who fought, tortured animals, and loved dining out with rich relations, playing the hypocrite before God and man through no necessity, but from a sheer awareness of his own insignificance – write how this young man squeezes the slave out of himself drop by drop and then wakes up one fine morning to discover that in his veins flows not the blood of a slave, but of a real human being...

Such a realisation may, of course, never happen, and indeed often never does happen, because responsibility for one's own fate is not always easy to accept. In this letter, Chekhov gives many potential rationalisations for a life of indolence, despair, resort to drink, etcetera, a life which his brothers in part actually led.

The never-attained goal

I hope it will be clear, therefore, why a fixation on equality of opportunity, at least in situations where there are no formal, legal obstacles to people's self-development, is disastrous; and why, if it becomes sufficiently general, it is bad for the whole of society too, and not just for individuals.

But, you might ask, if equality of opportunity is an intellectually frivolous idea or ideal, one that it impossible of achievement but yet which has a potentially disastrous effect upon many people's psyche, and through that effect on the psyche on the whole of society itself, why has it become an almost unassailable goal, that no politician in the western world dare deny? After all, the objections to it are not so very difficult to see or work out; indeed, one might say that they are rather obvious.

The answer is to be found in the use to which such an idea or ideal can be put. I am not suggesting that there is any central plot or conspiracy, only that there is a coincidence of interests; and that it is a universal human characteristic, or at least potential characteristic, that people are able, by means of rationalisations, to align their ideas and their ideals with their personal interests. I am not here making a Marxist epistemological point; I am not saying that, logically, it *must* be so; only that, as a matter of psychological and sociological fact, it is often so. And it is so in this case.

Let us try for a moment a little thought-experiment. Let us suppose that one wanted, for whatever reason, to erect or create a society in which a bureaucratic government arrogated to itself ever-more power to regulate and control a population, but to do so without the more obvious accoutrements of a tyranny, indeed to do it with the consent and even at the request of the population itself. The espousal of what kind of ideal would be propitious to the erection or creation of such a society?

I trust it will be obvious by now that equality of opportunity is precisely such an ideal. The very impossibility of it, the very fact that it is a mirage that recedes as one tries to approach it as it shimmers in the distance, is an advantage, not a disadvantage: for the failure to attain the goal justifies ever-greater and more vigorous attempts to do so. Moreover, it is clear that the nature of the goal itself justifies interference in the lives of citizens down to the very last detail; for there is literally nothing that anyone can do in the bosom of his family that does not affect the life-chances of his children, or those of other children by comparison with his. And the greater the failure of each successive politico-bureaucratic interference, the greater the *locus standi* for yet further interference. This is a world in which nothing succeeds like failure.

The beauty of the system is that, with each failure, resentment in the population grows, or is at least maintained. As we have seen, the resentful person sees himself not as an agent, but as a victim of circumstance; and a victim of circumstance demands that the circumstances should be changed. He cannot do this himself; he has to demand that someone else does it for him. And since that someone else can hardly be an individual, for all individuals who want to change the circumstances are in the same boat as he, a powerful organisation must do it. That organisation can only be a powerful political bureaucracy, that supposedly acts in defence of the interests of the humble and the humiliated. I do not know what such bureaucracies do in other countries, but I know that in mine they humble and humiliate the humiliated and humble, who nevertheless – because of their resentment at the absence of equality of opportunity – continue to look to it for their salvation. We spend billions (though nowadays I suppose we ought to talk in trillions if we want to get a hearing) on that salvation, but somehow it never comes.

In a way it is a beautiful scheme, as near to a perpetual motion machine as anyone has yet invented. The laws of thermodynamics, it seems, do not apply in politics.

Towards a victory, if only temporarily

It might be asked what, if anything, can be done about this, or indeed if anything should be done about it. After all, it seems that the dominated and those who dominate them share the same interests, that is to say to keep the whole perpetual motion machine in motion. But there are two problems: first, the perpetual motion machine is not really perpetual, at least not in the economic sphere, though it might be so in the psychological one; and second, though resentment, as I have said, has its satisfactions, a resentful existence is not really happy and indeed is such as is liable to outbreaks of irrational rage and brutality.

That, perhaps, disposes of the question of whether anything ought to be done, but does not answer the question of whether anything can be done. If, as I say, resentment springs eternal in the human breast, can it be expunged?

There is no final victory against it, any more than there is an end to history. The cardinal vices (among which envy, not a million miles from resentment, is one) are cardinal not only because they are cardinal but because they are a permanent feature or temptation of human existence. No one believes, surely, that now that the folly of speculative greed has been exposed, there will never exist such folly again. A man who could believe that could believe anything.

If I am right, and it is mind-forg'd manacles that encumber a much of mankind and imprison it, not least in our own countries which have designated themselves as free, then argument and changing minds is important. We should not, in so far as it is in our power, allow our political and cultural elites to peddle unchallenged the ideal of equality of opportunity, as if it were in the same category of ideal as mother-love, beautiful, warm and reassuring, and something that no decent person, or even person in his right mind, could very well oppose, and that, by definition, can have no harmful consequences. This work will be long and arduous; any victory will soon be followed by defeat, just as (in current circumstances) any attempt to reduce government deficits will soon be followed by attempts to increase them. But that is human life: two steps forward, one step backwards – or is it, as it often seems, the other way round?