

**FREE AND EQUAL: A PHILOSOPHICAL EXAMINATION OF POLITICAL VALUES.** By Richard Norman.<sup>1</sup> New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press. 1987. Pp. 178. Cloth, \$37.00; paper, \$12.95.

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At the heart of the two great competing political systems of the twentieth century lie commitments to two great competing values. In the eyes of its proponents, communism's most alluring promise is economic equality. Western democracies, on the other hand, wave aloft the banner of freedom, treating civil liberties as more important than equality. How should we choose between these ideals? The thesis of Professor Richard Norman's book, concisely stated, is that no such choice is necessary: "freedom and equality, far from being opposed ideals, actually coincide." If he is right, then there ought to be an attainable *via media* between Stalinism's wholesale curtailment of personal freedom and market capitalism's countenance of unequal distribution of wealth. As he develops this thesis, Professor Norman provides some flashes of wisdom on related matters. But his effort to harmonize freedom and equality relies on manipulative definitions of both concepts, and his conclusions are unpersuasive.

Professor Norman begins his discussion of freedom by contrasting John Stuart Mill's largely "negative concept," focusing on noninterference with an individual's actions insofar as they do not adversely affect others, with T.H. Green's radically "positive" and "social" view. Green, working from Hegelian premises, artfully identified freedom with "contributing to social good," and Norman joins Isaiah Berlin in pointing out the slippery slope toward tyranny onto which Green steps with this view. Norman does not mention, however, that Berlin, in the same article from which Norman quotes, called Green's view a "confusion of freedom with equality."<sup>3</sup> Norman himself now proceeds to precisely the same confusion.

Norman's version of freedom aims at transcending the inadequacies of Mill's, while avoiding the unfortunate consequences of Green's. "The central element in the concept of freedom is the positive one of being able to make choices, and . . . the negative fact of non-interference is related to it as one of the conditions for our be-

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3. I. BERLIN, *FOUR ESSAYS ON LIBERTY* (1969).

ing able to make choices.” Norman here demotes Mill’s noninterference principle to “necessary but insufficient” status. If an individual has a very limited range of choices, then a government’s mere noninterference with him does not fully enable him to make choices, and therefore the government is not truly ensuring his freedom.

The absurdity of this position seems to me self-evident, as does its motivation. Professor Norman is playing an old socialist game, the object of which is to “load” your definition of freedom sufficiently so that you can reply to the capitalist: the workers are not “unequal but free”; by virtue of their inequality, they are rendered unfree. Marx deployed this tactic repeatedly, and Frankfurt Marxists such as Marcuse exploited it still further; yet contemporary commentators such as Jon Elster, though generally sympathetic to Marx, have abandoned such projects of re-definition in the interest of philosophical good faith.<sup>4</sup> If freedom and equality are to be kept conceptually distinct—and they are certainly distinct concepts in all conventional understandings of the terms—freedom must mean something very close to noninterference. Otherwise, the important and interesting question of whether the two values can be reconciled is a nonquestion, resolved by the inflated and false definition of freedom.

Thus, at this early point in Norman’s book, his project and conclusions are foreordained. Freedom is impossible, he holds, without the positive assurance of a “range of meaningful choice.” Such an assurance, we ought to respond, may be desirable from many points of view, and it may be labelled “widespread prosperity,” “distributive justice,” or many other things, but it is *not* contained in the notion of freedom.

Professor Norman perseveres, as if he had not already decided the issues he is treating, and takes up the notion of equality as a separate concept. In seeking to establish the independent desirability of equality, Norman first rejects a merely utilitarian justification. “Equality is important not just because of what it leads to [an increase in the net happiness or preference-satisfaction of the world, as a utilitarian would argue], but because of what it *is*.” Before judging his argument for equality’s intrinsic value, let us examine what, for Norman, equality “*is*.”

According to Norman, equality breaks down into three components: equality of power, equality of material goods, and equality of educational and cultural opportunities. All three, for Norman, are

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4. See J. ELSTER, *MAKING SENSE OF MARX* (1985).

eminently, necessarily desirable. But it is equality of power, he contends, that is primary, and the necessary and sufficient condition for the other two. Only the most radically democratic distribution of power can *ensure* continued material and opportunity equality, as well as maintain itself. Without equality of power, equality of wealth will vanish when the most powerful people appropriate unequal shares. Similarly, equality of educational and cultural opportunity cannot be expected to endure in the face of great disparities in wealth or power.

If Norman's errors in his discussion of freedom involved collapsing distinct concepts (freedom, equality, choice, prosperity) into a single entity, he may be said to have committed the opposite distortion here. He makes much of the causal priority of equality of power to equality of wealth. But the intimacy of the relationship between power and wealth is not so easily dealt with. Marx's analysis of that relationship remains the most persuasive. No matter how radically democratic a society, the rich will be able to buy not only goods, but also services and protection—that is, power. Thus, if one regards equality as the most important goal, equal distribution of material goods is the most plausible method to achieve it. The distinction between equality of wealth and equality of power cannot do as much as Norman wants it to do, and his contribution to egalitarian theory is severely compromised by his dependence on this distinction.

But should equality be treated as an overriding social imperative? For Norman, equality has intrinsic value because human societies are essentially "co-operative." More precisely, they are at least *partially* co-operative; admittedly most are also partially coercive or exploitive. "Insofar as social institutions are not co-operative, they *ought* to be."

The first claim—that society "is" cooperative—is clearly true: The very formation of societies must be motivated by cooperative instincts, and cooperative assumptions probably underlie continued social cohesion. But the second, normative claim—that societies ought to be even more cooperative—has little support. The alternative to cooperation is not only, as Norman would have it, "coercion or exploitation," but also competition. And competition can be justified on various grounds, such as motivation, prosperity, innovation, and morale. So the normative claim neither follows from the descriptive nor seems to be very sound in itself.

At bottom, Norman's whole argument for equality rests on the same shaky ground. For egalitarianism, like cooperation, is of course a normative, prescriptive doctrine, and if Norman cannot

convince us of the desirability of extending "co-operation" to every facet of society, then by his own account he cannot do so for equality.

In his penultimate chapter, Norman tries to show precisely how "the ideals of freedom and equality converge upon the ideal of equality of power." That is, the establishment of radically participatory democracy should guarantee both "freedom" (in Norman's sense of the term) and "equality" of material and cultural benefits—as well as self-perpetuation of equality of power. Since Norman's definition of freedom is intended to include—before expanding upon—the minimal "non-interference" aspect of freedom, we are entitled to ask what will happen when, in a radically democratic and radically egalitarian society, an individual tries to improve his own lot without also improving everyone else's. A referendum might be called, and, if Norman is right about the enlightened egalitarian reasoning of such a society, it would vote to *restrain* the individual from such action. Freedom—by any plausible definition—will have been abridged here. Granted, a society may reasonably find such an abridgment desirable or even necessary. But to suggest, as Norman does, that this act of restraint from without is merely an *enforcement* of freedom is to distort beyond recognition and usefulness the terms involved. The above case is manifestly an enforcement of equality, at the expense of freedom. Any other account is mere word-play.

We are left, then, with our tired, unpleasant dichotomies. Redefinitions will not do the trick of lifting the world from its imperfect equilibrium into ethereal utopia. Norman's effort to do just that relies on distortions of both terms and doctrines. Politics, it seems, is indeed a matter of hard choices, and the utopian desire to transcend those choices continues to yield unpersuasive and potentially unpleasant formulas. The dream of "freedom and equality" is a lofty and admirable one, but one apparently not realizable in the world of imperfect humans. So long as that is the case, we ought to assess rationally which of the two goals is more important to us, and which is more feasible. To date, the historical evidence seems to direct us toward personal liberty. Some level of equality is surely desirable in light of our "co-operative" and sympathetic instincts, but for the short term at least, we should be wary of attempts, like Norman's, to "have it all."