

“From Each According to His Abilities . . .”

by Thomas J. Shelly

As a teacher, I found that the socialist-communist idea of taking “from each according to his abilities,” and giving “to each according to his needs” was generally accepted without question by most students. In an effort to explain the fallacy in this theory, I sometimes tried this approach:

When one of the brighter or harder-working students made a grade of 95 on a test, I suggested that I take away 20 points and give them to a student who had made only 55 points on his test. Thus each would contribute according to his abilities and—since both would have a passing mark—each would receive according to his needs. After I juggled the grades of all the other students in this fashion, the result was usually a “common ownership” grade of between 75 and 80—the minimum needed for passing, or for survival. Then I speculated with the students as to the probable results if I actually used the socialistic theory for grading papers.

First, the highly productive students—

and they are always a minority in school as well as in life—would soon lose all incentive for producing. Why strive to make a high grade if part of it is taken from you by “authority” and given to someone else?

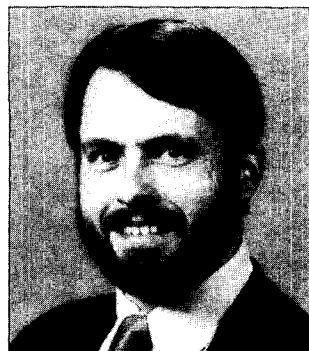
Second, the less productive students—a majority in school as elsewhere—would, for a time, be relieved of the necessity to study or to produce. This socialist-communist system would continue until the high producers had sunk—or had been driven down—to the level of the low producers. At that point, in order for anyone to survive, the “authority” would have no alternative but to begin a system of compulsory labor and punishments against even the low producers. They, of course, would then complain bitterly, but without understanding.

Finally I returned the discussion to the ideas of freedom and enterprise—the market economy—where each person has freedom of choice and is responsible for his own decisions and welfare.

Gratifyingly enough, most of my students then understood what I meant when I explained that socialism—even in a democracy—would eventually result in a living death for all except the “authorities” and a few of their favorite lackeys. □

The late Mr. Shelly was a high school teacher in Yonkers, New York.

This essay, first published in 1951 as “A Lesson in Socialism,” was a popular FEE reprint for many years.



The Morality of Freedom

Freedom. Presumably every reader of *The Freeman* is committed to this principle. But why? What good is it?

After I endorsed a federal budget “train wreck,” arguing that closing down the government would help people appreciate the value of freedom, one correspondent chided me: “What has freedom ever done for African-Americans?” The question is important. Consider the problems of poverty and crime. Consider the scourge of slavery and discrimination. Of what relevance is our abstract commitment to liberty?

Supporters of a free society sometimes seem to drift off into cant, denouncing the “state” and upholding “individuals.” They use the word “liberty” like a talisman, which they expect to mesmerize everyone. Critics of collectivism have long focused on economic analysis—inefficiency, lack of cost-effectiveness, and waste have all become bywords. And when the votes have been counted, they have lost.

This is not to say that practical arguments are irrelevant. Whether a policy works, and at what cost, are critical questions. The efficiency case for freedom is overwhelming.

But it is not the most important, or most convincing, argument. Advocates of statism have long understood this. They propose an increase in the minimum wage to help struggling families, not to eliminate imperfections in labor-management negotiations. They

propose corporate average fuel economy (CAFE) standards for automakers to save energy and the environment, not to make cars more cost-efficient. They propose safety regulations to save lives, not to ensure a proper balancing of costs and benefits in manufacturing. They propose the welfare state to assist the poor and elderly, not to standardize the provision of social services. In short, they emphasize the *moral* case for intervention.

Against which practical arguments usually fail. I want to ensure that poor families can feed themselves and you want to protect corporate profits. I want to preserve the environment for future generations and you want to let automakers make more money selling gas-guzzlers. I want to protect children’s lives and you want to ensure lower-cost production. I want to save the helpless and disadvantaged and you want to cut the deficit. There should be no surprise that advocates of a free society have so often lost.

But we have moral arguments too, stronger moral arguments since political freedom is, ultimately, based on moral principle. Rather than dividing society between ruled and rulers, we believe that all people are truly equal. That human beings really are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights. That they have the right to live their lives without outside interference, so long as they respect the rights of others. Liberty goes to the core of the human person, the right to live life with dignity,

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