William Morris’s Egalitarian Perfectionism

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William Morris was an egalitarian. Egalitarians believe that all individuals are equal in worth, no one counting for more than any other; and that society should ensure that all individuals are equipped to live lives of equal dignity. These are honourable principles, and society is more humane to the extent that they are endorsed. Yet how to endorse them, and how they should weigh against rival commitments such as freedom, culture or community, are different questions.

Today egalitarianism seems, on the one hand, so commonly accepted, and on the other, the subject of such arcane philosophising, that we scarce expect to find enlightenment from a Victorian decorator-cum-agitator such as Morris. But it is none other than Morris who has views apposite for current debates about equality. This is because, as I shall argue, Morris was an ‘egalitarian perfectionist’. Perfectionists hold that society should be committed to the improvement of human beings. Morris believed not only that the community must consider and define the nature of the good life, and foster and promote it once ascertained, but that this entailed egalitarianism, the remedy of disadvantage and subordination. A egalitarian perfectionist flies in the face of much liberal argument, which opposes any public statement on the nature of the good. By linking value and equality, Morris offers an interesting challenge to many current assumptions about justice.

It was an aesthetic revulsion to nineteenth-century society that shaped Morris’s egalitarianism: his politics began as ‘an act of rebellion against an ugly age’. Morris’s aesthetic road to socialism was made possible by privilege, accrued from the industrialism he so reviled, an irony not uncommon in the tradition of the Left. With an income from the family’s mining interests, Morris was able to leisurely discover his calling, and to underwrite its expense. He was educated in Oxford, and it was in that beautiful town of dreaming spires that he pursued his boyhood love for medievalism. By his mid-twenties Morris had, after a few false starts, established a design company with the crafts of the middle ages as its model. Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Company was dedicated to creating ‘art for life’, eschewing cheap, factory manufacture and ill-conceived designs for an integrated, organic aesthetic which relied on traditional methods and skills; a prototype for Morris’s ideal of the workshop as a ‘school of art’. Here, however, arises another familiar irony: the firm’s labour-intensive products were beyond the means of the workers who produced them, and were purchased almost exclusively by members of a privileged consuming class who themselves played no part in their creation. Thus Morris’s own production was at odds, in a significant sense, with his broad conception of art.

Morris’s medieval aesthetic was greatly influenced by John Ruskin. Ruskin, however, had no clear view as to how society might attain such an aesthetic, leaving it to Morris to go beyond a romantic riling against the present to form considered
beliefs on social change. As G. D. H. Cole puts it, Morris went beyond ‘a merely artistic crusade’, or ‘a venture in private philanthropy or personal example’, understanding that ‘the regeneration of the arts and the art of living was at bottom a political rather than artistic matter’. The artistic persists, however, in what might be called the beginnings of Morris’s subversive, extra-parliamentary politics: his founding of the ‘Anti-Srape’, the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings.

Here, heeding Ruskin’s precept that historical architecture is society’s inheritance, Morris came to challenge the inviolability of private property, fighting, as E. P. Thompson says, both ‘commercial rapacity and views of ecclesiastical propriety’. As Morris reported to the Society’s first Annual General Meeting, money and art are often at odds, and it is usually assumed that the latter must make way for the former. He was to complain that the beauty of Oxford had been sold ‘and at a cheap price, muddled away by the greed and incompetence of fools’. The first step towards revitalising the arts, therefore, ‘must interfere with the privilege of private persons to destroy the beauty of the earth for their private advantage.’

Morris’s bald claim that inequality is incompatible with healthy art might look like the apolitical judgement of a callous aesthete were it not for his broad conception of art as a source of value in everyone’s lives. On this basis he criticised capitalism for its ‘very inequitably divided material prosperity’ which meant that people ‘work as laboriously as ever they did’, but lost the ‘solace that labour once provided’, ‘the opportunity of expressing their own thoughts to their fellows by means of that very labour’. Morris thus turned to socialism where, he argued, useful, honoured work would provide both essential tasks as a ‘tribute to the community’, and works of beauty crafted at one’s leisure.

As evidenced by the titles of his lectures, ‘How We Live and How We Might Live’, ‘Useful Work versus Useless Toil’, ‘True and False Society’, Morris’s idea of social justice assumed a conception of value. Inequality not only made us ‘sweating and terrified for our livelihood’ it robbed the poor of the ‘true ideal of a full and reasonable life’. That Morris’s target was not merely the distribution of wealth but the misjudging of value is clear in his claim that the rich, too, are badly off, leading a life which is ‘empty, unwholesome and degraded’, and in his famous directive to the middle classes, ‘have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful’. Indeed, Morris suggests that country people of modest means are best placed to heed his warnings against the superfluities that inhibit a life of value. Workers, he contended, could not necessarily be expected to perceive the fact of their oppression or the effects it might have. Inequality had so degraded them that their choices were bound to be bad ones; reduced to such a ‘skinny and pitiful existence’ the worker ‘scarcely knows how to frame a desire for any life much better than that which he now endures perforce’.

Morris’s egalitarian perfectionism is worth assessing in light of contemporary arguments for equality. Perhaps the most influential is John Rawls’s theory of justice, which seeks to correct the ‘natural lottery’ that unevenly distributes individuals’ resources, be they talents or wealth. To do this we require political arrangements which find ‘the right’, that is just and fair social structures, prior to ‘the good’, that is, conceptions of value. Liberalism should be strictly political, distanced from pronouncements on ‘what is of value in human life’, or ‘ideals of personal virtue or character’. In the face of diversity, the imposition of a
conception of the good would involve an intolerable level of force. Moreover, a proper appreciation of the importance of forming our own conceptions of the good, and our attachment to them, requires that we do not repress some conceptions for the sake of a single, preferred one: neutrality is a means of respecting moral autonomy. Or, as Will Kymlicka puts it, the community must be neutral if individuals are to live their lives 'from the inside', according to their own convictions. Another liberal, Ronald Dworkin, argues that paternalism is wrong because it treats convictions as 'limitations or handicaps'. In an early essay, Dworkin draws the example of the beer-drinking, television-watching citizen whose preferences should be valued as much as those of the high-brow aesthete; it would be inegalitarian for the community to enact measures that prefer one set of values over others. As Dworkin has put it more recently, 'circumstances are plainly unequal when the law forbids some to lead the lives they think best for them only because others disagree'.

Of course, in adopting a perfectionist position Morris can be judged faithful to the temper of his time. Conventional ideas of propriety, that the public might dictate appropriate behaviour, would have been taken for granted by many in the late nineteenth century. Certainly perfectionism has been intrinsic to socialist theory from its origins. The socialist critique of inequality is also a critique of alienation, and alienation is an inherently perfectionist concept. It refers, not just to the unfairness of a life of hardship, but to the distortion in values such hardship imposes, making implicit appeal to the criterion of a good life which human beings ought to live. Morris in a sense anticipated Marx's 1844 Paris Manuscripts, not published until long after Morris's death. There Marx maintains that a consequence of capitalist inequality is that work, which should distinguish human beings from other species and be the source of human fulfilment, becomes an alien activity, a mere means to satisfy external needs.

Consider, too, liberalism, which emerged as a radical, subversive doctrine, and only very recently has become dominated by anti-perfectionism. In Morris's time, liberals were not prepared to rule out state direction of people's conduct even if their actions affected no one but themselves. Indeed, the great liberal individualist, John Stuart Mill, was prepared to qualify his principle that one could only interfere with an individual's actions if there was a risk of harm to others. Mill argued that the public should tolerate gambling, but he could not bring himself to permit gambling houses. In contrast, the main exponents of perfectionism in contemporary political theory have tended to be 'communitarians' whose posture can seem apolitical at best, conservative at worst, particularly when the source of value is located in the traditions of the community, without sufficient regard for their potentially oppressive nature. Calls for intersubjective conceptions of the self or virtue-centred ethics are not obviously connected with arguments about the distribution of wealth or the protection of personal freedom. But such charges about the politics of perfectionism look difficult to lay at Morris's door. Let us consider how perfectionism and egalitarianism might be linked.

Why do we condemn inequality? Because of our conviction that an unequal distribution of resources is unjust, given that all human beings are of equal worth, all equally entitled to a life of autonomy. Autonomy refers to the ability to choose the good, and it is not just lack of choice, but poor choices, which undermine one's
autonomy and which render one the unequal of others. Our autonomy can be
diminished as the result of bad choices because they close off the possibility of
future ones, as when the choice of forgoing an education reduces our options later
in life. But a bad choice can also diminish our autonomy because the choice itself
prevents us from developing and fulfilling our capacities.

Our concern for inequality is aroused by the spectacle of an impoverished, non-
autonomous life. This is a life misspent, unfulfilled, thwarted or stunted. Such a
life is not simply a function of lack of resources or opportunities; enormous
privilege may sustain such a poorly led life. But disadvantage doubtless diminishes
the chances of developing and fulfilling one's capacities. This not just because one
lacks the material means to do so. In addition, lack of material advantage produces
a culture which eschews intellectual and artistic pursuits, out of fatalism about
access to them, but also a hostility to pursuits whose rewards have never been
known. Thus there is the ironic fact that those who have the lowest level of
consumption focus their energies, not on higher pursuits, but on consumption at
the most basic level, on fast food, soap operas and shopping in malls. And
consumption is of course the furthest from the autonomous choice so lauded by
anti-perfectionist liberals. When we are consumers we are often at our most
unreflective and uncritical, least able to become the 'self-made men' that is the
ideological centrepiece of libertarian theory.

In his liberal argument for perfectionism, Joseph Raz reminds us that we treasure
autonomy because we value the capacity to choose the good, but it is to the extent
that the good is indeed chosen that autonomy is fulfilled. This is not to suggest
that autonomy is a mere means to personal fulfilment; the ideal of self-creation
implicit in autonomy suggests that an autonomous life is an end in itself. Charles
Taylor argues that being free is not just doing what you want, but ensuring that
'what you want doesn't run against the grain of your basic purposes, your
self-realisation'. It is not inconsistent to seek to promote autonomy whilst
declaring that some choices are not conducive to autonomy. Thus Morris did not
balk from a perfectionist position, putting his egalitarian object in terms of a vision,
a contentful image of a way of life. In News from Nowhere that Guest has arrived
at an egalitarian utopia is apparent in the clear, salmon-filled water of the Thames,
the impressive physique, countenance and attire of his acquaintances, the elegant
cityscape of London: in short, in the superior way of life that equality had
established.

We can distill from contemporary liberal argument two main objections
to perfectionism. The first is that perfectionists advocate a single conception
of the good and are intolerant of all others. Perfectionism, however, need not
commit us to a monological concept of perfection. There is considerable space
between neutrality about the good and 'ethical intolerance' of all conceptions of
the good but one's own. Raz is adamant that his concept of perfectionism is
pluralist. Not only do the values of autonomy and equality dictate pluralism;
Raz argues that pluralism and tolerance are necessary because complete moral
perfection is unattainable: there will always be 'virtues which elude one because
they are available only to people pursuing alternative and incompatible forms of
life.'

Socialists are, however, ambiguous on this point about pluralism. On the one
hand, socialists emphasise that equality involves the abolition of the division of labour and the end of social conflict, suggesting a society of homogeneity, without difference. On the other hand, socialist citizens can become accomplished in any branch of activity, as Marx says, choosing to ‘hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening’, and ‘criticise after dinner’. Is this perhaps not the diversity of pluralism, but rather that of a monological conception of the good, a variegated but single way of life? This might be dubbed the Morris way of life, since his life was famous for its marvellous diversity of pursuits, from poetry to politics to tapestry and book-binding. And although Morris is known for his fondness for the pastoral, he found town life as compelling as that of the country, once remarking that he was a ‘London bird’. So varied and prodigious was his pursuit of the good that his physician said that Morris died from ‘simply being William Morris, and having done more work than most ten men’. Did Morris believe that the Morris way of life ought to be lived by all?

Just as we might note the oft-criticised role of bourgeois patrons in Morris’s artistic endeavours, so too might we note the complex relation between patrons, crafts and workshop in the creations of the middle ages, that era so favoured by Morris. Lawrence Davis is critical of Morris’s medievalism as a dogmatic aesthetic which fails to appreciate modernity’s capacity for unleashing individuality. In his view, Morris promulgated a backward-looking, fellowship view of art as that which is directed to others’ needs and produced jointly with others. Not only did this view romanticise the past and dismiss the modern, it pointed to an illiberal, monocultural view of socialism.

However, if one enjoins more than one kind of activity, one must countenance differences in people’s choices about how to arrange their pursuits. And Morris contended that the extent to which one chooses to live in common with others ‘may differ pretty much according to our tendencies towards social life’. He also invoked pluralism to play down the prospect of conflict over the distribution of work and reward. Inevitable ‘varieties in temperament’, ‘differences in capacities and desires’, would facilitate individuals’ realisation of their goals in the face of a finite store of resources. Morris’s insights into the rhythm of work, where the restlessness and energy of toil are matched by a hope for ease and rest, also suggests a pluralist approach. However pleasurable we find it, ‘we must feel while we are working that the time will come when we shall not have to work’. Morris’s complaint that society had made people ‘unable to read a book, or look at a picture, or have pleasant fields to walk in, or to lie in the sun or to share in the knowledge of our time’, need not be read, therefore, as a call for universal fidelity to a single value of the variegated life. A second objection to perfectionism is that it is coercive. This objection is hard to take seriously. On the one hand, if by coercion we mean society rendering some choices more costly than others, then egalitarian perfectionism is guilty as charged, but then so is just about any polity. Liberal societies today, for example, encourage some ways of life and discourage others, in support for the arts and education, and lack of support for, even discouragement of, other leisure activities such as the consumption of alcohol. The means for doing so are various, from inducements and rewards, to penalties and punishments. Taxation is an obvious example of such ‘coercion’, one that Mill himself defended. In a context of inequality, sales tax has regressive effects, and too often the taxation
strategy is prompted by moralising views. In some domains today there seems an excessive, puritanical perfectionism which Morris would never have countenanced. Consider our fervent pursuit of anti-smoking beyond the parameters of a Millian harm principle, quite at odds with the charming encounter between Guest and the child shop clerks in the matter of a hand-crafted pipe and tobacco pouch in *News from Nowhere.* I suspect Morris would have raged over today’s preoccupation with anti-smoking as an illegitimate interference with one’s personal pleasures. Thus the question is probably not whether perfectionism, but whither, since it is difficult to imagine any society not taking an interest in the values—however private—of its citizens.

On the other hand, liberals can mean by coercion the forcing of people to subscribe to certain beliefs, as the Catholic Church did in the Spanish Inquisition. Egalitarian perfectionism is, however, innocent of this charge. The charge rests on the idea that our ways of life must be either immune to influence or putty in the hands of others. We should recognise, however, that our desires, tastes, even needs, are shaped within a social context, moulded by a myriad of influences, which we can and do go some distance towards designing. Of course one cannot ‘make people’s lives better against their own convictions’. A conviction is not a conviction unless it is one’s own, and a life cannot be lived any other way but from the ‘inside’. Once we forgo the crude conception of perfection by force, then opposition to perfectionism looks rather tenuous. Indeed, even Dworkin allows that what he now calls ‘ethical liberalism’ can endorse ‘short-term educational paternalism that looks forward, with confidence, to genuine, unmanipulated endorsement’.

Of course, the utopian Morris has little need of coercion; once conditions of inequality are abolished, people would be in a position to pursue their own, genuine goods. As Thompson puts it, socialists were to: ‘... help people find out their wants, to encourage them to want more, to challenge them to want differently, and to envisage a society of the future in which people, freed at last of necessity, might choose between different wants.’ A contemporary example that gives credence to Morris’s non-coercive egalitarian conception of perfectionism is the radical critique of the American idea of a ‘war on drugs’. ‘Law and order’ conservatives argue that tougher measures are required to stop the traffic and use of illegal drugs. People on the Left tend to disagree not because, as many liberals claim, that individuals’ pursuits are irrelevant to society, but because an inequalitarian context distorts our choice of pursuits. In the ghetto or slum, many take drugs out of hopelessness, in the belief they have no other option, whilst in the mansion or condo, emptiness or boredom also contributes to something of a ‘non-choice’. On the egalitarian conception of perfectionism, coercion is the wrong response to such choices; society should instead seek to remedy the social conditions that prompt them, and keep an open mind about the various forms value might take. I think we should trust Morris’s optimism about equality producing the conditions for leading better lives. At least we have little grounds, to date, for refuting it.

I have argued that William Morris’s aesthetic interests provide useful insights about the role of value in remedying disadvantage. Morris’s egalitarian perfectionism might be humorously reduced to the slogan, ‘workers of the world unite,
you have nothing to lose but your chintzes!' But the idea that inequality enslaves one to false values or condemns one to an ugly life, that 'men in civilised societies are dirty, ignorant, brutal', and this can be judged 'unfair', is a brave argument in today's context of moral scepticism and political neutralism. And, when current debates about justice and equality take on a complexity akin to a Morris wallpaper, the direct way Morris approached these questions provides salutary common sense. Moreover, Morris's egalitarian perfectionism need not be coercive nor unitary. Equality thus requires, not just access to the means of life, but the acculturation of individuals to live well, and there is reason to think, with Morris, that greater equality, in turn, would bring with it the acculturation which enables human fulfilment.

NOTES

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5 Morris's disappointment in traditional party politics is evident in News from Nowhere, in which the future utopian society used the parliament buildings for storing dung, Selected Writings, op. cit., p. 39.
7 ibid., p. 231.
9 ibid., XXIII, p. 262–3.
10 ibid., XXIII, pp. 255.
11 In emphasising Morris's preference for beautiful things over people's company Fiona MacCarthy makes the odd suggestion that he accordingly called for a socialist society replacing the 'governance of persons' with the 'administration of things'. William Morris: A Life for Our Time, (London: Faber and Faber 1994), p. 6. These words originate with Engels, not Morris, and they refer, not to the enjoyment of objects, but to the harmonious social relations under socialism which would render the exercise of political power unnecessary. See 'Socialism: Utopian and Scientific' in R. C. Tucker (ed.), Marx-Engels Reader, (New York 1978), p. 713.
14 ibid., XXIII, pp. 281 and 10. See also Morris's pitying portrait of the privileged


16 *The Collected Works of William Morris*, op. cit., XXIII, p. 281. The inhabitants of Nowhere also lament that ‘the once-poor had such a feeble conception of the real pleasure of life’.


19 ibid., p. 311.


29 Mill thus argues that the greater experience of educated people gives them authority to pronounce on the good, *John Stuart Mill: A Selection of His Works*, op. cit., Ch. 2.


37 Lawrence Davis, ‘Morris, Wilde, and Marx on the Social Preconditions of

38 Although he added, ‘for my part I can’t see why we should think it a hardship to eat with the people we work with’, *The Collected Works of William Morris*, op. cit., XXIII, p. 23.

39 ibid., XXIII, p. 234.
40 ibid., XXIII, p. 16.
41 ibid., XXIII, p. 99.
42 ibid., XXIII, p. 10.
43 *News from Nowhere*, Ch. VI.
45 ibid., p. 115.
47 So my mother joked when I told her about the subject of this paper.