

## "AFFIRMATIVE DISCRIMINATION" :

EQUALITY AS FRIEND/ENEMY OF JUSTICE ----- ELLIOTT #1752

*The abstract virtue and condition called "JUSTICE" is the end which "EQUALITY" claims to be the means to. Ethicists easily show that the claim is excessive: when justice is narrowed down to and defined as egalitarianism (i.e., socially created and enforced arithmetic equivalence among population sectors), "EQUITY" (i.e., impartiality in power's treatment of individuals) is sacrificed....This thinksheet qualifies the rhetorical justice-claiming of the current (Oct/83) political-economic use of the phrase "affirmative action."*

1. The original use of "affirmative action" (Hubert Humphrey, JFK, et al) was negative: removing job-impedences based on employer's preferences among factors other than competence. Any individual was to be judged wholly and only on merit (competitive ability). That was, I felt, too slow: I favored devices to help the downtrodden catch up --so much so that I often said "It's we white men's turn to be discriminated against." I sustained this view even when I came to be that discriminated-against white man: when at age 60½ I was unemployed, and good friends in power in three seminaries said they preferred me on the merit basis, the story was everywhere the same: "Our trustees have decided against hiring any white men: we can look only at women and minorities." No real skin off my old nose: I freelanced from then on, and still am. But my sons are a different matter; they are young white men facing "affirmative discrimination" (Nathan Glazer's term for reverse discrimination), which has appropriated to a new meaning the old phrase "affirmative action"--a shift from negative to positive: government is asked, instead of removing impedences for any, to impose impedances on some, viz., white males (in employment lines, the new privileged class being all population sectors other than white males). My sons' predicament set me on a thinking course that finds me now back to the original meaning of "affirmative action," viz., meritocracy, which is compatible with EQUITY and therefore JUSTICE though it is incompatible with EQUALITY as a goal and EGALITARIANISM as a philosophy. Complexity: In the abstract, equality and even egalitarianism can lay some claim to justice. So the jurisprudential process, now, is the adjudicating casuistically (i.e., case-by-case) the rival claims of merit (which sees only the individual) and condition (which sees the group as superior to the individual job-applicant--the Caiaphas viewpoint, Jn.11.50). (The Supreme Court--I think, wisely--is going slow here, but not foot-dragging.)

2. Reality changes faster than does ideology. "New occasions teach new duties" as grounds shift, old factors recede, new factors intrude, new vistas appear. How unreal, today, seems a debate between merit-ideologs and condition-ideologs! Dilemma: in social ideational conflicts, words, which are the primary social carriers of values, are sharpened into weapons (Greek, "logomachy") and used as symbols, signals, shorthand in the interest of the particular ideology's victory. Where's the dilemma? When you're fighting (as I often have been and am) for some value championed by some slogan (e.g., "equal opportunity"), I am both friend and enemy of both truth and justice --enemy in that to some extent I go along with excessive claims to truth and justice; and if I point out the excesses and the distortions consequent thereon, my fellow-fighters perceive me to have gone over to the enemy. The truth that truly makes us free is, when we're into ideological struggle, the truth we least want to hear.

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\* "Superiority" is so heavy-slippery that the next thinksheet (#1753) has to be on it.  
\*\* Including noblesse oblige, as on the current USA volunteerism stamp: a hand reaching down to another hand.

3. But what is this "truth that truly makes us free"? Who knows? The ideolog knows, and you don't even have to ask. Who else knows? Nobody. If we're caring and responsible human beings, we are always struggling for human values, the humanum; and our struggling torques, twists, distorts our perception of and service to truth and justice. Both epistemologically and sociodynamically, we can't jump out of our commitments and contexts into a celestial sphere where we purely perceive truth and justice and purely will their victory in human affairs. This fact is hard to exploit politically, but it is of increasing force in cultural and scientific hermeneutic(s), whence I pray it will increasingly influence politics (the most resistant of feedback loops).

4. It's possible but difficult to have one foot into your truth (as mine is into Jesus as the Truth that "shall make you free") and the other foot exploring toward the truth--else a philosopher could not be a caring and responsible human being, and no caring and responsible human being could become a philosopher. (Jn. is highly ideologi- cal about truth: as Jesus it frees you, 8.32; only Jn. has Pilate asking "What is truth?"; and, more than the others, this Gospel dis- torts history by most radically shifting blame for the Crucifixion from the Romans to the Jews.) It's almost a principle that the more a truth has seized you, the less free you are to be a servant of the truth: it is a principle that those unseized by a truth are uninter- ested in serving truth.

5. In this "truth that truly makes us free," what is this "free," and who are "we," and what is the force of "truly"? Ideologs are im- patient with all these questions, even with questioning itself. I have often heard "Which side are you on?" because of my habit of be- speaking the neglected truth. Justice, I claim, isn't just for hu- man beings; it's also for truth. Greek-speaking widows are "over- looked" (Greek of Ac.6.1; Latin, "looked down on"), because the food- distributors' superior attention is being given to Aramaic-speaking widows. We all have our preferences, predilections, prejudices, don't we? Something of all this is to be honored as of our mother's milk-and-speech (German, "Muttersprache"); and something is to be abandoned as childish and, if held, evil. Something of it is divine assignment: I am, by God (no blasphemy), a white male Westerner of the 20th century (with a good chance of making it into the 21st). I must not betray (1) God, (2) my whiteness, (3) my maleness, or (4) my Westernness. And, in the business of avoiding these betrayals, I must not violate (1) truth, (2), justice, or (3) my neighbors of other human categories (viz., nonwhites, women, nonWesterners). But the trigger is almost everywhere cocked against me when I speak out for the white male Westerner; and I encounter many of my category whom I must consider traitors to (1) God's categorical assignment, (2) their whiteness, (3) their maleness, or (4) their Westernness.

6. I believe in the mutual superiority of all human categories. Of the categories, the only one whose superiority\* doesn't have to be proved is the white male Westerner; and as a member of that category I am obliged to help prove the superiority of all other categories. I can't manage this by concentrating on the deleterious effects of the dominance of my category: any category's dominance would have com- parable deleterious effects, power being power. Under the banner of mutual superiority, I can promote meritocracy ("From each according to his ability") and the politics of compassionate intelligence ("to each according to his needs").\*\* And in doing so I serve both the biblical and the Marxist causes.