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My Many Selves

Wayne C. Booth

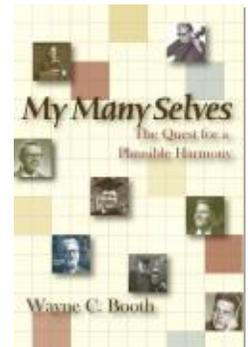
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Chapter Nine

An Egalitarian Quarrels Scornfully with a Hypocritical Bourgeois

The men of culture are the true apostles of equality.

—Matthew Arnold

The moral regeneration of mankind will only really commence, when the most fundamental of the social relations is placed under the rule of equal justice, and when human beings learn to cultivate their strongest sympathy with an equal in rights and in cultivation.

—John Stuart Mill

Democracy means Equality; but what does Equality mean? Obviously it does not mean that we are all alike in . . . any faculty. . . . But as their bodily needs are the same their food and clothes and lodging can be rationed equally; and they are all equally indispensable. The cabin boy needs more food and wears his clothes out faster than the aging admiral; but the same income will provide for either of them. They are both equally necessary to the work of the fleet.

—George Bernard Shaw, *Everybody's Political What's What*

*Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en
Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them
And show the heavens more just.*

—King Lear, addressing the world's billionaires

*They all shall equal be!
The Earl, the Marquis, and the Dook,
The Groom, the Butler, and the Cook,
The Aristocrat who banks with Coutts,
The Aristocrat who cleans the boots.*

—W. S. Gilbert, *The Gondoliers*

As I came out of our drugstore this morning, a man came toward me to sell a copy of *StreetWise*, our Chicago newspaper sold by the homeless. As usual, I took a dollar from my pocket and accepted the copy of the journal. Then he said (almost predictably), “Sir, you know, I’m in real trouble this mornin’. Nobody wants to buy any papers, and my family at home is hungry, jes like me here. Could you gimme a couple more dollars?”

Since I wasn’t in a hurry, I subjected him to some of the skeptical questions that I usually ask before succumbing to such hackneyed appeals. (For the source of such skepticism, see chapter 11.)

His answers were much more plausible than I often get—and he did actually *look* hungry. Well, I happened to have three hundred dollars in my pocket, just obtained from the cash machine. The thought occurred to my egalitarian self (or if you prefer, call it my half-Christian or half-Mormon self): “Why not for once do something really generous—startle him, change his day, maybe his life? Give him the whole pile! To do that won’t affect your standard of living one whit, next week or next month.”

I reached into my pocket and pulled out a twenty, said “Good luck—and I hope you find a job,” and walked off, moved by his tearful thanks. But the egalitarian (I’ll label him Egalitarian-Booth) was a bit troubled by the knowledge of how little that twenty would actually do for the man.

The very act of writing a *LIFE* can be called anti-egalitarian. The LIFER can be described as aspiring to join, in the very act of writing, an elite. All of us LIFERS have had at least some education (unlike billions of brothers and sisters from today back to the moment when humanity emerged from the slime). Archaeologists all agree that before “we” learned to write, something like five thousand *generations* had gone through human life, coping, inventing, competing, triumphing—but all of ’em just plain illiterates! We precious few have somehow learned to read and write. And by the very act of attempting to write a book, we show that we have, unlike a vast majority of our siblings, enough escape time from the survival struggle to write.

And then there are the writers we might be tempted to claim are themselves in an elite class. I bet that 99.99 percent of Homo sapiens have never even *thought* about *writing* about having *thought* about how to *think* what their life

means; that vast majority, the lost souls “down there,” haven’t ever even *read* a book about it. Though perhaps 99.99 percent of all human beings have differed from our animal ancestors by consciously *thinking* about what life and death mean, those who do not write or read *LIVES* are simply cast aside by us LIFERS. They give us no clues about how to live because they have kept their thoughts unwritten. So you and I are “up here,” as I write and you read about it; we may even be *thinking*.¹ So we’re immensely superior to most of the others, right?

Even though that elevation of LIFERS is intended ironically, the fact remains that behind the sarcastic attack on Bourgeois-Booth is a forceful challenge to EgalitarianB’s passionate belief that “all men and women are created equal.”² I am absolutely certain that my life is not inherently worth more than that of a totally illiterate peasant working for a feudal lord, or an enslaved whore in Babylon, or an illegal immigrant earning less than minimum wage, or some beggar I meet on a Chicago street. Oh, yes, the actual life that has been *granted* me, especially the material comforts and the amazing fortune of Phyllis and family, can in many ways be called far better, but that’s where the unfairness paradox comes in. The circumstances of birth have mistreated those sufferers all the way, as circumstance has most of the time “blessed” me. But “in theory,” EgalitarianB still passionately believes that we were all created equal—or *should* have been.³

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1. What a difference between my ironic, self-mocking speculation about our billions of nonwriting ancestors (did Adam ever write a word?) and the picture created by those who wrote the Bible. I wonder what the author of Genesis was thinking about how to write the opening, as he sat down and started the account we now have. Was he tempted to put it this way: “In the beginning was the Word, who invited me to bear witness to the Light He was creating, that all *men* through him might believe.” Could he have put it like this, as Joseph Smith did in his “Inspired Version”? “And it came to pass, that the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Behold, I reveal unto you concerning this heaven and this earth; write the words which I speak.” (Published by the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1944.)
 2. Equality was never *fully* embraced by our founding fathers (consider the granting to blacks of a three-fifths vote), and it’s actually practiced by hardly any leaders these days. And it’s violated daily by BourgeoisB.
 3. But, ThinkerB intrudes, consider those who are mentally or physically maimed at birth. My passion for full equality will never cope adequately with *incurable* inequalities at birth. Mormon doctrine copes with the inescapable paradox by declaring—often quite cruelly—that how we are born is determined by how we behaved on the other side before birth. My father’s “patriarchal blessing,” an official message given when he was newly married, told him that in his life before birth he had chosen and deserved his wonderful parents and his new wife. The standard blessings don’t refer to that quite so frequently these days, but they often stress that preexistent behavior is what produces birth inequalities.

Nobody claims to know when the ideal of *universal* equality first cropped into some thinker's head. But as it did—as some scribe suddenly began to wonder about full human justice for all—that thinker immediately joined one kind of elite, already contradicting his brilliant new idea. His (oh, shucks, I catch myself assuming it was a male!)—*her* mission then became, “I must convince those proud, selfish defenders of injustice that my views are superior. And I wonder whether there are any other thinkers anywhere bright enough to join me, ‘up here.’” This paradox is thus inescapable.

For more than sixty years I've been consciously and unconsciously wrestling with it. We were taught by the Constitution that “all men are created equal” and that we lived in a “democracy” where everyone's opinions counted equally; taught by Christ that God cares at least as much for the one lost sheep as for the ninety-nine in the fold; taught by my family (thank God) that when a depression “bum” (oh, yes, we called them that—but never to their faces) came to the door we should feed him (it was never a woman) and also that blacks and Indians are really our equals and would someday be recognized as such by the LDS church; taught by Grampa Booth that all the wealthy were criminals. Yet we were also taught that Mormons are inherently superior to non-Mormons and that “the glory of God is intelligence”—a quality not given to everyone.

Taught in such conflicting ways, I was thus a prime target for elitist messages, most of which now seem not just paradoxical but absurd: the true elite are the religious folk who get the message straight; no, the true elite are the atheistic Socialists and Communists who fight for total human equality; well, yes, but the true elite among those elite are those who obtain the most education; but obviously the true elite are those who get the *right* kind of education, being taught by VainB.

I have spent a lot of time in life trying to join the only true, genuinely defensible elites: those few who have really thought hard about those paradoxes. No, actually, the *genuine* elites are those who don't misread an ironist when he uses words like *true*, *genuinely*, and *defensible*.⁴

In WWII, I met many draftees who, by their contempt for the “dummies,” got me thinking about my own elitist pride. Here's how I put it in a letter to Phyllis in March of '45.

4. My life is full of misreadings of my attempts at irony. Phyllis claims that most of them, when I intend to mock some stated view, actually betray the fact that the view has occurred to me and is therefore a thought genuinely—and thus shamefully—in my head. I deny it, but maybe she's right. When I played the game here just now, hoping you would join me in mocking anyone who sees ironists as an elite, had it not occurred to me that successful ironists *are* superior to nonironists or those who fail at it? Of course we are. Oy vey. And isn't it true that the true elite are those who know just a bit of Yiddish?

It is surprising to me to notice how many people think of themselves as more intelligent than “most people.” The average GI [here in Paris] is always saying, “Now you take the average GI, and all he does is ——.” The average college student, when he gets in a bull session, says, “It’s too bad there aren’t more students who get together and discuss things intelligently like this. But the average student is not concerned with such things.” Indeed, most pretensions to intelligence, including my own, are made up largely of scorn for the ignorance of others. More and more I try to pin myself down to something specific when I start classifying others as ignorant: “Just what is it that I know and they do not know?” “In this particular instance, is my ‘intelligence’ tangible, or is it just something I’ve conjured up to protect myself and my pride?” “If the task of teaching them were mine, what do I have to teach that would genuinely improve them?” “Are my ‘intelligence’ and their ‘ignorance’ merely circumlocutions for differences of opinion or emotional background?” Generally, when I ask these questions, I manage to squeeze some sort of answer out of the situation.

Any careful reader so far will have uncovered in my Selves at least two branches of the paradox: (1) the conflict between morality-driven, left-wing EgalitarianB, pursuer of political justice, and a cowardly nonactivist, protecting BourgeoisB’s academic and family territory; (2) the conflict between EgalitarianB as writer, wanting his work to address everybody, and the “intellectual,” especially VainB, who wants to be admired at “the top.”

And what about political inequalities? My family was politically divided, though all were more sympathetic to the impoverished than most Americans seem to be today. Grampa Clayson was an ardent Democrat; once he had risen above poverty, he actually won an election to the Utah State Legislature. Gramma and Grampa Booth were ardent Republicans.⁵ As I moved more and more strongly to the Democratic side, I can remember being very angry at Gramma for her claim that the “abominable President Roosevelt” was so awful that she sometimes felt like moving to Argentina.

Hovering behind these differences was a Mormon history of radical communalism, or communitarianism, usually referred to as the United Order. Joseph Smith had received revelations from God dictating the “laws” of “consecration” and “stewardship.” All members should deed *all* property to the leaders, receiving in exchange a “stewardship” of the property consecrated unto God. The ideal was total communitarian sharing—total equality among all members (except, of course, the leaders). Though the inescapably egotistical leader never quite managed to practice total financial equality with other

5. The Republicans were not quite as dominant in Utah at that time as they are now.

members, he always insisted that every last penny of anyone's property is God's property and that it all should be shared equally with all of the other righteous. And Prophet Smith actually worked out several possible community plans for realizing that dream.

In increasing conflict with America's rising capitalism, the dream survived in various weakened forms after the Mormons fled to Utah. Not long after leading the emigration to Salt Lake City, Brigham Young, while growing increasingly wealthy himself, established more than two hundred "United Order" villages, one actually named Orderville. They were considered to be a first step toward the time when all property would be placed in God's hands. In those villages every member surrendered every penny to the community leadership and then was given an *equal* share back, day by day, week by week.

Today such "communitistic" views are hardly mentioned by the Church, as the devout Steve Coveys build their mansions and the Church invests more and more millions in thriving companies. A fragment of the dream does survive, as I've reported above, in the commandment to give a full tenth of one's "increase" to the Church and thus to God. But I never see the ideal of *total* sharing even mentioned. Yet the ideals of equality and full justice still survive in the beliefs of many, including me: equal sharing is the—no doubt hopeless—escape route from current exploitations and from the woundings of democracy. And the Church does engage in vast international charity enterprises.⁶

Fairly early in my teens I found myself converted to various versions of communitarianism: total equality of opportunity. Living almost next door to our town's only millionaire family, the Firmages, envying them, sort of in love with their daughter, Edna Fae, humiliated about being ordered to knock on their door trying to sell some ears of corn from Grampa Clayson's yard, I quickly came to detest their wealth and to imagine what our town would be

6. For a witty satire underlining that word "hopeless," see the novel *Facial Justice* by L. P. Hartley (1960, now out of print). He portrays a society whose dictator tries to enforce full equality, including equal physical beauty. To no reader's surprise, it just won't work. For recent, careful probings of the complex and troublesome issues and paradoxes faced by us egalitarians, see Keith Hart, *Money in an Unequal World* (London: Texere Ltd., 2000); Brian Barry, *Culture and Equality: An Egalitarian Critique of Multiculturalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Simon Blackburn, *Being Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); and Nick Hornby's novel, *How to Be Good* (New York: Riverhead Press, 2001). See *Daedalus*, Winter 2002, for an excellent collection of essays exploring both the history of inequality in our so-called democracy and the reasons for its increase.

like if that wealth were really shared equally. Grampa Booth's slogan about the millionaire "crooks" made more and more sense to me. I remember a fantasy, after getting a hamburger in our one snackbar, about an ideal future when all of the cooking would be done communally, all of us taking turns at it, so that only on a few days of the month would any one family have to cook—or do dishes. These days, on the rare occasions when I take a bite at a fast-food place, I'm amused to think just what a parody of my young dream these joints provide; I don't have to do any cooking, and I don't have to do the dishes, while these slaves go about their underpaid jobs.

No doubt my reading of Mormon history about communal sharing was a prime source of early interest in diverse versions of Socialism and Marxism. Through my late teens, I was reading steadily in various leftist journals—*The New Republic* (totally different from today's rag), *The Nation*, *Partisan Review*, and books by Socialists and Communists. I longed more and more for a country where everyone was treated not just kindly but equally. George Bernard Shaw's *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism* totally converted me to the notion of absolutely equal pay for all. What possible argument could be offered against it, other than the desire for triumphing over the poor by hanging on to one's fortune?⁷

Meanwhile I was irresistibly acceding, every day in multiple ways, to the American pressures that obviously and often viciously violate equality. Various competing Selves were creating BourgeoisB, the hypocritical aspirer to join the financially comfortable. (At the same time ThinkerB loved Mencken's coinage, Booboisie, but that love didn't quench the others' aspirations.) While professing hope for a Socialist revolution, I often behaved like an aspiring full-fledged, commercialized "American." For example, though EgalitarianB was strongly pro-union, he somehow didn't find time to join a single strike demonstration. (ThinkerB was too busy working toward his Ph.D.—hardly a Socialist aspiration.)

The only time I came close to genuine political action was in the 1948 election, when sort-of Socialist Henry Wallace was running against Truman

7. On the day I wrote that sentence, a new issue of the *Boston Review* arrived, with a powerful argument for a *universal basic income* (UBI)—a guaranteed survival income for every one of the earth's billions (Philippe Van Parijs, "A Basic Income for All," *Boston Review* 25, no. 5 [Oct./Nov. 2000]: 4–8). I immediately joined the small minority of his sixteen respondents who embrace the idea—but then, after a bit more reading in his respondents, I had to join those who claimed that it simply could never be worked out. The paradox between the desired and the realizable is alive in me right now, as in many of those respondents. What is not paradoxical is my contempt for those among the wealthy who spend energy and money to get a less "progressive" tax system or to kill all moves toward equality.

and what's-his-name. I hated what's-his-name—ah, yes, it was Tom Dewey—and I was contemptuous of Truman, so I campaigned to get Wallace on the Illinois ballot. Phyllis and I went up and down the streets of Hyde Park, knocking on doors and depositing leaflets in mailboxes.

But in the election booth, Booth faced the same dilemma that supporters of Ralph Nader faced in 2000: a vote for the tiny minority will be wasted—and it is likely to help the even worse candidates win. So at the last minute I changed my vote to Truman, and the following morning I shared in the celebration in our college hall; at least we had helped defeat the GOP. But EgalitarianB was not at all elated; a country that would give so few votes to Wallace, a country full of people like me who would sell out and vote for a dummy like Truman was doomed.⁸ (I should add that, as with millions of other Americans, my opinion of Truman's presidency has risen considerably over the years.)

Before becoming a wishy-washy Socialist, I had gone even further and become, for a while, a surreptitious, secret “Communist sympathizer,” a kind of half-assed Trotskyite who most of the time posed in public as just a liberal. The move to the left began early in my missionary years when I stumbled on some persuasive Communist authors—some Stalinist, some Trotskyite. After reading Anna Louise Strong's account of her intellectual struggles in converting to Communism, I felt myself half-converted and spent two diary pages going back and forth on the issues, feeling “completely upset.”

That strong temptation toward a full joining of the left was reinforced by an astonishing coincidence in the army. I found myself bunked for a couple of months with Harold Rosen, then an ardent British Communist. (His level of commitment was revealed when I asked whether his wife was also a Communist. “You think I would ever marry a *non*-Communist!”) He did not break with the party until the Hungarian disasters in 1957. He is still as close a friend as one can manage cross-Atlantic; we still debate what to do about the world, now that Stalinism has totally tainted the very idea of Communism.

I was immensely impressed not just by his passionate commitment but by his learning and wit. He took me to some of the public Communist meetings, where I was surprised by the quality of the speakers and their debate. How could intellectuals as bright as Harold and those speakers be wrong in their devotion to a cause that so clearly supported my desire to work for ultimate total equality? So EgalitarianB decided that when he returned to the U.S., he would consider joining the Communist Party there.

8. Phyllis and I heard Truman give a campaign speech in Provo, Utah. I was shocked that the media ignored a goof he committed: “Now I've embarked on this campaign trick—I mean trip—to . . .”

A year later, settling into graduate school, he attended a couple more Communist meetings. ThinkerB found these speakers far inferior, in both style and content, to the British intellectuals Harold had introduced me to. Then, after some internal debate among Selves, I took part in a *public* debate with Party members about the movie *The Ox-Bow Incident*, which I loved and they hated. I found them totally unwilling to engage in real debate: it was all obediently predetermined by what their “superiors” had decided. So it was clear that I couldn’t have anything to do with a party that echoed the Mormon notion of blind obedience to authority.

I was still, however, a socialist, lowercase and deep down. As I played the double role of conventional scholar/subversive socialist, I remember often thinking of myself as a lifetime “subversive.” For more than a decade I had been a “subversive” in Mormonism (I was still teaching classes in Church—teaching what I would assure myself was the *genuine* form of Mormonism), and now I was a subversive in the classroom, teaching *genuine* American ideals—full equality—as opposed to all the major politicians in all parties. I even said in my journal, violating what I would now describe as the teacher’s true goals, “All good teachers must be subversives: that’s their role, to undermine the conventional beliefs of students.” Though I never openly told a class, “You should vote for X, not Y,” EgalitarianB was always subversively trying to turn students toward this or that version of “the left wing”—not in terms of political membership, necessarily, but in terms of fundamental beliefs about the primacy of social and economic equality.

Meanwhile—to stress again the hypocritical edge to that belief—I was usually silent in public about my inner commitments. Though writings of Marx were sometimes on our course reading lists,⁹ I would *try* to reveal no more commitment to him than to other authors on the list. I had embraced the pedagogical commitment of my favorite mentors: “Teach every thinker’s works as that thinker would want them to be taught.” Like my teachers Ronald Crane and Richard McKeon, I was pleased when students complained about my having been dogmatically committed to two authors who were obviously in flat conflict. But I’m willing to bet that the more perceptive students detected, beneath that effort at fairness, my actual biases.

A clear example of what now appears to me as *indefensible* hypocrisy is my failure to take any active part in the civil rights movement of the ’50s and ’60s. As a lifetime-committed antiracist, angry at the Church for its refusal to grant full equality to black members, I was envious of those who went south

9. I’ve been told that today’s best-known Marxist thinker in America, Fredric Jameson, says that I introduced him to Marx when he was in my freshman class at Haverford. I wonder if that’s true.

and demonstrated. But I didn't even come close to going. Though I gave a bit of cash to this or that organization, HypocriteB didn't wear badges or carry signs or take part in marches.

I also curse myself for the mild, self-protective form of my protests about the Vietnam War. I was certain that it was an awful mistake, as it now appears to almost everyone who studies it. So what did I do about it? Nothing but cautiously support student protests, quietly sign some letters of protest, privately argue with supporters. Why didn't I join protest marches? Why didn't I wear angry buttons or carry placards or threaten dishonest presidents and legislators with more angry letters? (The extent of their lying has become big news these days, as some careful studies have emerged. But we knew about most of it from the beginning.)

I just lived with my conflicts day by day, in effect protecting myself from troubles that strong protesting would have produced. And these days, as the troubles in Iraq mount, I find myself saying, "Why are you wasting your time on that book when you should be joining public protests about our inhumane and grossly unfocused retaliations and preemptive strikes?"

There was one amusingly bland defeat of HypocriteB a bit earlier, in about 1957 or '58 when the Kresge drugstore chain was being rightly attacked all around the country for its racism. I was walking home from a visit to my dentist in downtown Richmond, Indiana. I saw across the street a line of protesters—some of them my students—marching in front of the Kresge store. I was almost torn apart: HypocriteB knew that Earlham College, while proclaiming political neutrality, would want nothing to do with any public protest. EgalitarianB knew he should join; the protesters were justified. So finally I walked across the street and joined the march.

Next day I was called to the president's office.

"You realize that you probably cost Earlham a lot of money yesterday—your marching in that parade got featured on local TV last night, and I've had protest calls from members of the Board."

We discussed it, with him insisting that I promise never to do it again. I can't really remember what I finally "promised," though it was probably something like "I promise never to do it again without thinking very hard about it." What I do remember is that I did nothing further to support the causes I deeply believed in—except for, again, those tiny annual cash gifts.

Am I still a socialist, lowercase? BourgeoisB answers sharply, "Of course not." Even those who, like Fredric Jameson, still consider themselves Marxists

admit that totalitarian top-down socialism can be dangerous. We all “know” that *total* bureaucratization, of the kind to which Socialist aspiration has so often led, just does not work. Managers with no attention to marketing and competition do a worse job of devising production rules and controlling costs than market competition does. Right? And don’t the atrocities of Stalinism prove the disastrous effect of destroying competition?

If Socialism had come to America, I might not have been able to buy a pen this week or perhaps my brand of toothpaste or toilet paper. Right? Who knows? As one satirist has put the problem, “The Socialist’s dream was that everyone should be equally deprived.”

But EgalitarianB is still uncomfortable with that picture, as he considers the fat-cat CEOs who receive four hundred times the income of their workers. Do my other Selves join him in hating those bastards? Absolutely—unless, like George Soros, they donate *most* of their excess to the increase of justice and fairness. Do I still believe that the government should impose an even more progressive tax law that would pass much of that wealth down the line? Absolutely. I’m still longing in my heart for some sort of financial and social equality—equality of *opportunity*—in our increasingly commodified, competitive, rise-to-the-top culture. I can prove that longing by reporting my response when I recently read a favorable review of a new book, *It Didn’t Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States*.¹⁰ I bought the book as soon as I could, wondering, “Why *did* the socialist aspiration to justice and equality fail, not just in American culture but even in my soul?”

Well, an answer I like better than the marketeer’s is this: We socialists have sold out to the comforts of getting ahead, the pleasures of owning houses and cars and yachts that others cannot afford. We hypocrites surrender daily to violations of the ideal of true equality; I’m typing here on my expensive computer, sitting on a costly ergonomic chair. We’re just back from a lovely vacation in Utah at our second home, having been able to afford a third “senior citizen” seat on the plane for my cello. We’ve each paid more than \$4,000 recently for hearing aids, without thinking very hard about what \$8,500 would mean to this or that impoverished family.

The egalitarian is still alive in me—I wouldn’t be writing this chapter if that were not so. I still believe (does the belief come from the Jesus I meet in the Bible and the Joseph Smith I read about in mostly ignored historical records?) that I can be *fully* defensible to my better Selves only when I follow the directive to “sell all that thou hast and give it to the poor.” St. Francis is surely the right model for a “saved” world. I believe that—while,

10. Seymour Martin Lipset and Gary Marks (New York: Norton, 2000).

simultaneously, Phyllis and I make (somewhat shaky) plans to take all of our family for a week in the Bahamas at Christmastime.¹¹

“Stop that squandering,” EgalitarianB shouts. “You must give those thousands of dollars to some charity—or, perhaps better, to some political cause.” Does BourgeoisB have a persuasive response? Not really. And so my Selves go on quarreling, one enjoying the pleasures of full inequality, another pontificating against the fat cats up the line, while pitying—but doing little to aid—those below.

Through all this, ThinkerB works hard to exonerate my Selves by making the obvious point, daily, that the real problem is not me but our commercialized societies and the fantastic complexities faced by anyone who tries to combat the increasing inequalities. Unless we find large-scale measures to fight back, democracy is doomed. At which point I hear a voice shouting, “Why, then, don’t you drop this silly book and get out there to work with organizations that . . .” But a chorus of other Booths silences him.

Meanwhile, how does the egalitarian face his aspirations to academic success? How does he face the Booth who has hoped to be admired most by the “top” minds?

A while ago I read a report of the annual conference of Mensa, that bunch of elitists who boast to the world that they have an IQ score above something or other. I found myself laughing about their false pride. How could anyone be so stupid as to think that scoring high on an IQ test makes you somehow a Somebody, looking down on the Nobodies?¹² Even if you believe that, how could you be so stupid as to declare *openly* that kind of absurd pride? And how could anyone with any sense want to associate for five minutes with a crowd whose yardstick of human worth is such a test?¹³

Ten minutes later I was making out a check for the annual gift to the University of Chicago, which could almost be called my true church. Why? Because it’s inhabited by the truly elite, the intellectually “saved.” Because when I walk down a campus sidewalk, I can count on meeting friends and strangers who have really studied Aristotle and Plato, Aquinas and Spinoza, Kant and Hegel, not to mention the history of literary criticism, of rhetoric,

11. The plans were never realized, in part because of worries about travel after September 11, 2001. Fortunately the debates about the vacation were never as troublesome as those dramatized by Jonathan Franzen in *The Corrections*.

12. Again I’m obviously referring to Robert Fuller’s book, with his attack on “rankism.” (See chapter 4.)

13. Some months after writing that draft, I read (in February 2001) that Mensa was putting some energy into charitable activism—with a hint of equality-drive in it. Bravo.

of England in the year 1819, critiques of T. S. Eliot's anti-Semitism, and on and on. I can count on a conversation about ideas with almost anyone I meet, anywhere on campus. When I meet strangers in the bookstore, students or faculty members, they are buying interesting books, and we can chat about them. Colleagues can read my manuscripts and tear them apart productively. What a place! We almost chant to one another the slogan: "This is *The University*, the one place where pursuit of ideas counts more than anything else."

If that isn't elitist, what is? And if you believe, as I do, that every person on this earth is as important as any other person, that teaching high school or elementary school in the inner city is more important than teaching undergraduate students and graduate students, that teaching a nonreader how to read a newspaper is actually more important than teaching a grad student to read Jacques Derrida or Homi Bhabha, how can you defend your having sold out to the most intellectually elitist university on earth?

I can reconcile this conflict only with self-centered language like "LOVERB chooses what he loves to do." There is simply no way to argue that more is done for the "good of the world" by teaching where I've taught than is done by a devoted teacher in the inner city. I've sometimes claimed that if I could have been paid an equal salary and given an equally light teaching load in a high school, I would have chosen to teach in public high schools. But is that really true? I doubt it. For reasons already clear to you, early on I joined the "intellectual elitists," the kind who look down on Mensa for having the wrong notion of what intellectual quality is: "It's not IQ, buddies; it's ideas, thinking, probing, inquiry—call it what you will." And VainB adds, "We genuine thinkers are at the top of the intellectual pyramid."¹⁴

It's hardly surprising that I find such inner conflicts irresolvable. If you believe Christ is right in his exhortations, how can you spend your life concentrating on "improving the lives" only of those whose lives are already "at the top"? You should concentrate on the "least of these," right?

Absolutely. Maybe if this book sells a few copies, I can afford to raise my annual charity commandment from 10 to 15 percent.

14. EqualityB, feeling a bit oppressed, now whispers, "Every member of Mensa is absolutely equal, in the eyes of your God, to every other human being. It's stupidly elitist of you to feel contempt for them even while you wonder whether, if you had taken the IQ test at the right time, you could have been invited to join. Besides, haven't many of them read Aristotle or Heidegger? Surely they do real thinking—occasionally?"

