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RANKING WORLDS BY WORDS:

A CASE FOR INEQUALITY

A few years ago, a powerful head of state was chided in private for his statist economic policies being in flagrant contradiction with his free-market convictions. Ever shrewd, he replied: "Everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die". Professional politicians certainly do not; acting on unpopular principles is their rare luxury, but avoiding political suicide is a dire necessity.

Václav Klaus has come closer than almost any contemporary statesman to emancipating himself from this dismal rule. He is of the almost extinct species, the conviction politician. I first met him during the time when the Soviet Union was breaking into pieces, and I have taken much pleasure in following his career ever since. We have had few occasions to exchange views, but I have been an admiring, distant witness of his actions in the service of his country and the liberal principles we share.

Abstract. Some pairs of words self-evidently rank the worlds they describe, others do not. Just and unjust rank, but equal and unequal do not. Making equality superior by explicit axiom fails to achieve its purpose if axioms need plausibility. An alternative, representing equality as social justice, does not resist scrutiny. Arguing the merits of cases is apt to result in a draw and generates a presumption for inequality.

1. HIERARCHICAL ADJECTIVES

1a. "Recent economic developments in East and South Asia and Latin America have accelerated the rise of average incomes, **but** have increased inequality".

"University reform in France may enhance achievements in higher education, **but** it is bound to increase inequality".

Were it not for the **but** asking to be remarked on by being in italics, such sentences might well have passed most readers without alerting them to the part of their meaning that is left implicit. Higher incomes and improved education are presented as good changes in the state of the world, greater inequalities as bad changes, the one being as self-evident as the other. A world where some characteristics, e.g. the incomes of different people, are equal is self-evidently superior to another world that is identical in all respects except for the characteristics in question, e.g. incomes that are unequal. The words "equal" and "unequal" rank them in a peremptory manner that assumes self-evidence, rendering any supporting argument redundant and out of place. The innocuous little word "but" accomplishes this feat. Were it replaced by "and", the sentences above would leave the question of a more equal world being superior or inferior to a more unequal one, or being simply incommensurate with it, scrupulously open.

One may add that the use of the "but" is legitimate only if the question of the superiority of equal over unequal in any relevant respect had been decisively settled. If such is not the case, employing "unequal" as self-evidently signifying a bad thing that offsets some good thing, is at best sloppy and naïve, at worst a sleight of hand of doubtful honesty.

The power of words to establish a hierarchy between worlds will be looked at a little more systematically in Section 1b.

1b. *Good – bad, beautiful – ugly, useful – useless, clever – dumb, adequate – inadequate, just – unjust.*

Big – small, long – short, loose – tight, heavy – light, soft – hard, equal – unequal.

As it transpires from the example of the two sets of pairs of contrasting adjectives above, some of these pairs establish hierarchical ranks between the characteristics of worlds to which they are **cet. par.** applied, while others do not. The second of the two sets does not settle rank; if two worlds differ only in one having a characteristic that is long and the other that is short, whether one is superior to the other depends on the particular characteristic in question. Long life-expectancy may outrank short life-expectancy, but long working hours may be less agreeable than short ones: with-

