

What do you need?
(And who should decide?)

Have you ever heard this expression?
“From each according to his ability,
To each according to his needs.”

This expression was made popular in the 1800s by Karl Marx. It is one of the principles of communism. (I’ll refer to it hence as the “From/To.”)

In this article, I will totally discredit that phrase. Prove it to be wrong; a contradiction; impossible. I’m going to demolish this phrase so thoroughly that, by article’s end, you’ll be able to hear the ghost of Karl Marx squealing like a whipped hyena.

It’s like an unbalanced equation, as false as saying: $2 + 2 = 100$.

I hasten to say: It is not enough to prove something “unworkable.” Some light-weight, so-called defenders of freedom will prove (very convincingly, with every fact supporting them) that, for example, socialism is “unworkable” and “impractical,” but then say nothing about the immorality of socialism, or the morality of a free society (capitalism).

I will not address at length the moral issues. Author/philosopher Ayn Rand spends a good portion of her novel, *Atlas Shrugged*, telling of an auto manufacturer (by coincidence, located in Wisconsin) that operated by the “From/To” code of morality, and effectively refutes it.

Consider this example. Suppose one man’s ability allows him to gather 50 sticks; the Master Planners conclude that he doesn’t *need* any sticks (he has too many at his home, already); the Master Planners confiscate the 50 sticks and give them to another man, whom they decide *really needs* them. If that example leaves you asking, “Well, what’s wrong with that?”, please go read something else.

Three examples

Thanks for continuing to read. Here are three more examples I’ll use throughout this article. Please keep them in mind.

Mr. Homebody and his family have a nice home, which he designed and built. He is continually improving the appearance of his property. He would like to buy more land, and is seriously thinking about building an addition onto his house.

Ms. Jazz has a fine collection of 78 rpm records, and takes great pleasure in listening to them. He’s very knowledgeable about the musicians represented by his collection. He is constantly going to record shows, and browsing eBay, and continues to acquire more records for his collection.

Mr. Cash has a lot of money saved up. He is always looking for ways to make more money.

Where did they come from?

To prove the “From/To” false, we need to fill in some missing elements.

“From each according to his ability.”

How does something come *from* somebody?

The 50 sticks “came from” the man because he went out, searched for them, and picked them up. The man had to choose to go out, make some effort, and gather them.

To state the first line of the “From/To” more completely: “A Master Planner can take

what has been produced by a person.

Ah ha! The “From/To!” didn’t say anything about producing or creating anything. (That’s likely deliberate.)

Ah ha!—again! The “From/To” didn’t say anything about a Master Planner! Again, that’s probably deliberate. But it’s implied. There has to be *someone* to “take *from*” the person who has produced the item or service that is worth taking, in order to “give *to*” the person who needs it.

Mr. Homebody, Ms. Jazz, and Mr. Cash have something now. Each already has a good life, and has a plentiful supply of what they value.

But each *wants more*.

Is it good to want more?

If you ask this question, consider the alternative. To want nothing—truly, absolutely want nothing—have no goals, hold nothing as a value—is considered by some as virtuous.

(I suspect this moral principle is propagated by certain Master Planners who realize their policies will result in oppressive poverty; they want their impoverished chesspiece subjects to accept their poverty as proof of moral virtue.)

Most rational (reality-oriented) people have no problem with wanting to achieve a certain level of comfort and security (home, reliable income), and then, wanting more.

Again, think of the alternative. If you have trouble, look up symptoms of a condition known as “flat affect.”

Wanting to preserve one’s life, and wanting to promote it, are aspects of life itself. Wanting nothing, in contrast, is a form of living death.

How does one get more?

How did our examples reach where they’re at? How does each intend to *get more*? These are very important questions.

Mr. Homebody has worked in landscaping and home construction and repair for years. He used income and knowledge from his work to build his fine home and environs.

Ms. Jazz has worked for years in a manufacturing firm, working her way up to planner and supervisor. She uses her income to provide a comfortable life, and to support her interest in 78 rpm records.

Mr. Cash makes his money from investments. He works with markets not as a gambler, but as an informed risk-taker.

Each person has used skills, knowledge, physical work or some combination thereof to produce a value. The production of that value is a creation of wealth; the amount of wealth in the area increases. The creator of that value/wealth can then offer it for sale (if a free market exists).

In contrast, each person could have decided to get what he/she wants through theft. By stealing goods and money, a home can be improved; more records can be purchased; one’s cash is increased—as long as one can get away with it.

With theft, no wealth is created. In fact, if theft is widespread, the people creating it will shrug and say, “If it’s going to be stolen, why create it in the first place?” The wealth in the area actually decreases.

Why should a person choose to produce, create wealth, and trade on a free market (that is, why should a person choose to be a *capitalist*?), instead of stealing and looting? For a detailed answer, I again refer you to *Atlas Shrugged*.

Creating wealth—stunning implications

There are people who consider all of life a zero-sum game. Obviously, this is not true.

By applying skills, knowledge, physical work or some combination thereof, something new is created that had not before existed. If what is produced is of value, to the producer or to others, then wealth has been created.

See the Foundation for Economic Education's graph, elsewhere.

Read a brief history of India, whose massive population suffered terribly for most of the 20th Century under socialism and communism, but then started experiencing greater prosperity when it took some tentative, imperfect steps toward freedom (capitalism).

Contrary to the zero-sum advocates, more people, producing (in a free market) more, creates more wealth.

In fact, with the Earth's continued population growth, it is conceivable that extreme poverty can be ended (if mankind does not turn its back on capitalism, which is a pretty big "if" in view of current self-destructive trends).

There's another *very* important implication. Allowing more immigrants into this country will increase the wealth of the country—for every immigrant willing to be a producer.

The typical immigrant wants a better life. Maybe he/she was doing all right back home; but he/she *wants more*. Each wants a nice place to live. Nice things for the family. A comfortable home. Good furniture. Recreation. Entertainment and art. Good food.

To acquire more to improve

OK, as any xenophobe will point out, the immigrant might take someone's specific job away, because he is willing to work for less. But by *wanting more*, and working hard and smart enough to be able to buy what he wants, the immigrant has created a *greater demand* for goods and services, which means *more opportunities* for that guy who lost his job. (If that guy thinks the job he lost is his only opportunity in life, that's his mistake.)

So if you ask yourself, "Am I in favor of allowing more immigrants into the country?" you should also ask: "Do I want to live in a wealthier country, with more opportunities, with more people trying to think of innovative ways to improve my life?"

(Of course, immigration should not be a free-for-all. For example, there is no need to allow known terrorists come here.)

The "From" is limited

It's good to know one's limitations.

And good to push them, sometimes.

There are a limited number of days in the week, and years in one's lifetime.

By building upon past knowledge, more and more can be accomplished. A person with a bulldozer can move more earth in an hour, than a person with a shovel.

But the amount of goods and services that any one person can produce, at any level, the "from" in the "From/To" equation, will be finite. That's important to understand, before moving on to...

The "Need" is limitless

What a person *needs* or *wants* is potentially limitless.

What, after all, does a person truly need?

Bare sustenance? Enough rice and water to keep a person alive?

A few blankets to keep warm on cold days?
A small apartment, or a section of a communal shelter?
A car to get to work?
Internet? Broadband?
This is why the “From/To” equation is unbalanced. One side is finite; the other infinite.
No, wait, we have to ask something else here...

Who decides?

Suppose Mr. Smith looks at Ms. Jazz’s record collection and says, “What foolishness! She doesn’t *need* that junk.”

The proper response to Mr. Smith is: “Butt out, buddy!”

That is, it’s proper if you believe in individual rights, with each person setting his/her own life goals. That is a free society. That is capitalism.

But in a non-free society, one or more Master Planners decide what each person needs. Non-free societies come in a disgustingly plentiful variety: socialism, semi-socialism, democratic socialism, communism, fascism... and more.

In a planned society, with Master Planners in charge, need becomes finite. It *has to* become finite.

“You want or need an addition to your home, comrade Homebody? How dare you ask such a selfish thing! Be happy with what you have, and be grateful if we Master Planners don’t take what you have and give it to someone with greater need!”

“You want more 78 rpm records, comrade Jazz? Are you kidding? We’re glad you brought this to our attention. You don’t *need* those records, comrade. So we have just sent a squad to confiscate them. They will be converted to cash, and the money will be given to those *truly* in need.”

“You want more cash, comrade Money-Grubber? GUARDS!”

We’re better off

...when wants or needs are left to each individual, and when they are potentially infinite.

Because that means there is potentially an infinite amount of work that can be done.

After making all the plans, Mr. Homebody could provide income to an army of carpenters and landscapers by hiring them to enlarge his home and improve his grounds.

Ms. Jazz could hire dozens of search services to scour rummage sales and search antique malls for the records she wants.

Mr. Cash could create a chain of financial offices that make more money for him, by making more money for his clients.

But let’s face it. “Infinity” is beyond any person’s, or any society’s reach.

There are limited numbers of landscapers or carpenters, and Mr. Homebody’s funds, however rich he might be, are limited. And Mr. Homebody couldn’t (and wouldn’t) live in a house that is infinitely large.

The number of 78 rpm records that Ms. Jazz actually wants are limited. Even if she were able to magically snap her fingers and have every such record ever created, she might spend the rest of her life listening to each one, but the thrill of finding a rare label would be denied her.

And Mr. Cash? Like any of our examples, so long as he respects the individual rights of every other individual (that is, so long as he is a capitalist), the only way he can make more

money is to create more values, wealth, innovations, and improvements for everyone else. Let no limit be placed upon him!

With all the people who want more, and act to produce more to get what they want, overall wealth is increased; innovations improve our lives; and more opportunities are created.

With Master Planners in charge, society not only screeches to a halt, but starts sliding backwards.

Revisiting the formula.

“From each according to his ability,

To each according to his needs.”

I think we can now clarify the “From/To.”

“Master Planners can take whatever wealth a person has created, and give it to whoever the Master Planners believe needs it.”

This is, obviously, incompatible with individual rights.

What kind of sentiment would be compatible with individual rights? This is definitely not the only way this could be stated, but it might be something like:

“Each person owns his/her own life, and has a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Each person retains those rights unless he/she violates those rights in another. Each person owns whatever he creates with his own mind and body, and is free to trade those goods or services, or give them away, at the producer’s sole discretion.”