

Introduction to *Equality and Justice: The Demands of Equality*, Peter Vallentyne, ed., Routledge, 2003.

The Demands of Equality: An Introduction

Peter Vallentyne

This is the second volume of *Equality and Justice*, a six-volume collection of the most important articles of the twentieth century on the topic of justice and equality. This volume addresses the question of whether justice requires equality of some sort. Other volumes address the following issues: (1) the concept of justice, (2) whether justice is primarily a demand on individuals or on societies, and (3) the relative merits of conceptions of justice based on equality, on priority for those who have less, and on ensuring that everyone has a basic minimum, of the relevant goods (Volume 1); the question of who (animals, members of other societies, future people, etc.) is owed justice (Volume 3); the question of what kinds of goods (welfare, initial opportunity for welfare, resources, capabilities, etc.) are relevant for justice (Volume 4 and part of Volume 5); contractarian conceptions of justice (part of Volume 5); and desert and entitlement conceptions of justice (Volume 6).

Pure egalitarian theories of justice hold that an action (social structure, etc.) is just if and only if it distributes the relevant goods equally. There is much disagreement over what the relevant goods are (welfare, opportunity for welfare, resources, primary goods, capabilities, etc.) and this issue is explored in depth in *Volume 4: Distribution of What?* and in part of *Volume 5: Social Contract and the Currency of Justice*. The articles in this volume mainly predate this more recent discussion of the “equality of what?” discussion; they typically assume that equality of well-being or some kind of equality of opportunity is required by egalitarianism.

Individuals, of course, are not descriptively equal. Some are taller, stronger, or smarter than others. Abstract egalitarianism holds that, despite this descriptive inequality, individuals have (at least initially, prior to their choices) equal moral worth, are equally morally deserving, or are equally entitled to our concern and/or respect. Construed this abstractly, almost all plausible theories of justice are egalitarian. For this reason, egalitarianism is typically understood as requiring some kind of material equality (and not merely formal equality), and we shall so understand it here.

One possibility is that justice requires that individuals be as equal as possible in all respects. This is a crazy view. It would require the homogenization of human differences: to the extent possible, we should all look the same, have the same skills, etc. No one defends this view.

Another view is that justice requires equal considerations of our interests. This can be interpreted in different ways. If it is combined with the idea that people's interests should be promoted, it can lead to a kind of utilitarianism (e.g., that an act is just if and only if it maximizes total well-being). The idea here is that the increases in the well-being (or interest satisfaction) of each individual matter equally, and thus that justice requires that resources be allocated in a way that maximizes total (or perhaps average) well-being. Given that resources have a decreasing marginal impact on well-being (e.g., \$1 can affect a person's well-being much more when she is poor than when she is rich), this view will tend to favor equality of resources, but it does not tend to favor equality of well-being (e.g., because it is indifferent between a very equal distribution of well-being and a very unequal one, if they have the same total well-being). Furthermore, the tendency to equality of resources is highly qualified: it holds only to the extent that different individuals have the *same* capacities to generate well-being from resources, and it holds only to the extent that adverse incentive effects (e.g., not having to work in order to get benefits) are minimal.

A different way of construing equal consideration of interests focuses on the *level* of well-being (or interest satisfaction), rather than increases in well-being. This could lead to the requirement for some kind of equality of well-being. The view that justice requires equally valuable outcomes (whether it be with respect to well-being, wealth, or some other aspect of outcomes) faces, however, two powerful objections. First, it leaves little room for incentives and the benefits that they can bring for increased productivity. Second, it leaves no room for holding individuals accountable in principle (as opposed to for contingent efficiency reasons) for their past choices. Suppose that everyone starts with equal well-being and effectively equal opportunities, and then some wisely choose to invest in their future while others unwisely choose not to. Several years later those who chose wisely are very well off, while those who chose unwisely are poorly off. Equality of well-being requires that resources be transferred from those who are well off to those who are poorly off, but this seems unjust. Why should those who chose wisely have to share their resources with those who chose unwisely? This issue is explored in depth in *Volume 4: Distribution of What?* and in the second part of *Volume 5: Social Contract and the Currency of Justice* of this collection.

A more promising form of egalitarianism requires only that individuals have equally valuable *initial* opportunities. This leaves agents accountable for their choices when they start from a position of equal opportunity. The focus here is on initial opportunities in order to ensure that agents can be at least partially accountable for their current opportunities. There are many versions of opportunity egalitarianism. One issue is the “opportunity for what” question. As discussed in Volume 4, there are many different kinds of goods relative to which equality of opportunity might be required: well-being, wealth, social positions, primary goods, capabilities, and so on. A second dimension of variation in opportunity egalitarianism concerns the understanding of opportunities. A very weak form requires only that the law treat all individuals

equally (e.g., laws that do not allow women to vote are unjust). A slightly stronger form requires this of social norms as well (e.g., norms of hiring that do not allow women to be hired no matter what their qualifications are unjust). Both of these versions focus on formal opportunities without addressing the effective ability of individuals to take advantage of them. Stronger versions include not only the rules of the game but also the initial external assets of individuals (mainly, financial wealth). Such versions typically require that two individuals with identical innate capacities should face equally valuable life prospects. Stronger still are versions that include the personal capacities of individuals (intelligence, etc.). On such views, equality requires that all individuals have equally valuable life prospects. Many of the articles in this volume discuss different forms of equality of opportunity, as do some of the articles in *Volume 4: Distribution of What?*

There are, of course, all sorts of question about the nature and plausibility of equality in general and equality of opportunity in particular. Here I shall mention but two of them that are discussed in the readings. It's generally assumed that there is a single sphere of justice with a single set of relevant goods and a single set of principles of justice. Michael Walzer, however, argues in *Spheres of Justice* (and the reading included in this volume) that there are many distinct spheres each defined by the meanings of the social practices involved. In the medical sphere, health may be the relevant good, and need satisfaction may be relevant criterion. In the political sphere, political power may be the relevant good, and equality may be the relevant criterion. Equality may not matter in many spheres, but it may still matter at the global level. Those privileged in one sphere should not, Walzer argues, be systematically privileged in most other spheres. Related to this point, is a possible conflict, raised by James Fishkin, between equality of opportunity for a good life, parental autonomy (parents having wide discretion on how to raise their children), and hiring by merit (positions should go to the most qualified). No matter how

much redistribution of wealth we impose, if positions are allocated on the basis of merit, and parents have a lot of discretion in how they raise their children, then some children (those who are not raised well by their parents) will have below average opportunities for a good life. This raises deep questions about the role of equality of opportunity in a free society.

### Suggested Further Reading

- Ackerman, Bruce. *Social Justice in the Liberal State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).
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- Nagel, Thomas. *Equality and Partiality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).
- Nielsen, Kai. *Equality and Liberty: A Defense of Radical Egalitarianism* (Totowa: Rowman & Allanheld, 1985).
- Nozick, Robert. *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974).
- Raz, Joseph. *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).
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- Rawls, John. *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).
- Temkin, Larry. *Inequality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).
- Van Parijs, Philippe. *Real Freedom for All* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
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