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Egalitarianism: Fair and Equal?

New Thinking on Egalitarianism

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ROBERT M. WHAPLES

Inequality is an exceptionally beautiful thing. Or maybe it’s a terribly ugly thing. To most people, it depends on what is unequal and why it is unequal. Love it or loathe it, egalitarian sentiments and concerns about inequality are clearly on the rise in both politics and the academy.

Because of this renewed interest, Christopher Coyne, Michael Munger, and I (the coeditors of *The Independent Review*) issued a challenge last year, inviting authors to submit papers to explore, reassess, and critique the very concept of egalitarianism—relating it to ongoing debates in philosophy, politics, history, law, and economics—and promising a reward of \$10,000 (generously contributed by an anonymous donor) for the best essay. We received twenty-seven submissions. All of them have something original, thoughtful, and important to say about egalitarianism, so selecting only ten for inclusion in this symposium was no easy task—especially because of the wide range of approaches to the subject. Selecting the best of them was even more challenging, and some might have urged us to make things easy on ourselves or be “fair” by dividing the prize equally among the top few papers and giving merit badges to all the participants. Instead, we are thrilled to announce that the winner of the Independent Excellence Prize is Adam Martin for his incisive analysis “The New Egalitarianism.”

Robert M. Whaples is professor of economics at Wake Forest University and co-editor and managing editor of *The Independent Review*.

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Martin argues that modern egalitarianism rejects older thinking on the subject. Consider racism (or sexism or any type of antiotherism). Martin argues that the old definition of racism was “individual conduct that is motivated by either (*a*) antipathy to other races or (*b*) a belief that those races are inferior.” However, the New Egalitarians’ definition, which has grown to dominate thinking in many parts of academia, is that racism equals “socially constructed, ‘invisible systems conferring racial dominance’” (quoting McIntosh 1989, 4). Martin points out that accurately diagnosing the second type of racism requires social scientific understanding of how social structures operate and sufficient historical knowledge to judge how social structures have disadvantaged certain groups. Thus, it requires an immense amount of knowledge and cannot be judged by laypeople, unlike the first kind of racism. It requires rule by experts. Second, he argues, these rent-seeking experts practice an intellectual style characterized by attempts to evade critical scrutiny, using vague and indeterminate terms and—more importantly—simply denying many of their critics standing to weigh in on the subject because, they argue, these critics are privileged by the system. Countering this obscurantism makes it especially hard for some to question the New Egalitarians’ arguments—which increases their appeal in some quarters as they battle to make this new way of thinking the norm.

How did we get to this point, and where are we headed? James Harrigan and Ryan Yonk answer these questions with a conceptual and historical roadmap in “From Equality and the Rule of Law to the Collapse of Egalitarianism.” They argue that in the early history of the United States, a direct line can be drawn from belief in human equality to the rule of law to an emergent regime based on negative rights as exemplified in Founding Fathers such as Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Thomas Paine. That line held for a century or so, but then the nation drifted to a regime predicated on positive rights and a corresponding large, powerful, redistributionist government exemplified by the ideas of the Progressives and Franklin Roosevelt. They argue that this shift in the American electorate’s attitudes is playing out in an unsustainable manner. Policy makers are largely unconcerned with recapturing the original conception of equality because there is little profit to them in telling the American public what it cannot have. Redistributive policies are extremely well supported by many voters, so policy makers roll back such policies at their own electoral peril. As a result, the nation is now drowning in egalitarianism. Because government has grown in both size and scope, the nation’s financial situation has become dire. As the national debt grows beyond its limit, it will require an end, of sorts, to the redistributionist egalitarianism experiment. In the final analysis, a regime cannot be based on notions of both positive and negative liberty because the former undermine the latter in every instance.

Many egalitarians argue that “brute luck” leads to unfair (because undeserved) inequalities, justifying redress. In “The Misuse of Egalitarianism in Society,” James Otteson questions this reasoning by showing—with the example of the undeserved bad luck of a student whose marriage plans disintegrate—that bad luck often results from choices whose outcomes should be respected and not corrected. He demonstrates that

policies that would match up with egalitarian goals are far more difficult to craft than is typically envisioned and shows that the likelihood that such policies will work the way we would ideally like them to is lower than generally imagined. Because it is impossible to eliminate all categories of luck—running from chance encounters between people who can help one another to unpredictable changes in the environment or in human society—Otteson advocates that an egalitarianism of respect for people and their decisions replace an egalitarianism of inputs or outcomes.

The egalitarianism embraced by classical liberals such as Otteson relies heavily on the concept of universal human dignity and moral agency. As Peter J. Hill explains, however, for most of history these beliefs about human rights were highly unusual. In earlier times, few defenses of human inequality were even proffered, and slavery, one of the worst manifestations of inequality, existed for most of recorded history. In “Judeo-Christian Thought, Classical Liberals, and Modern Egalitarianism,” Hill shows that the idea of universal human dignity and moral agency has its roots in a metaphysical concept—that all humans are the bearers of God’s image. Western societies owe their commitment to human equality to the influence of Jewish and Christian ideas about human dignity. Modern liberalism also has benefited from Enlightenment era thinkers who provided a way out of religious conflicts over heresy. Those philosophers grounded their philosophical views on universal dignity but also articulated a way of instantiating human equality in mores and laws that limit the use of power to enforce a particular definition of correct thinking.

John Rawls is undoubtedly the most influential modern thinker on fairness, but Michael Munger argues in “Egalitarianism, Properly Conceived: We ALL Are ‘Rawlsians’ Now!” that many readers misconstrue the implications of Rawls’s arguments. Rawls was not a simple egalitarian advocating strict equality. F. A. Hayek shared Rawls’s conclusion that using income redistribution to ensure the welfare of the least well-off is a wealthy society’s obligation, and Munger contends that we can synthesize Rawls and Hayek to become “Rawlsians” by realizing that the obligation to ensure the welfare of the least well-off arises *because* the prosperity resulting from market capitalism allows gainers to gain enough to easily compensate the losers and still prosper. Munger warns that people who end up below average often protest procedurally fair voluntary transactions because they do not actually care about procedural fairness; they simply want more money. He explains that although capitalists may not deserve the profits that they reap, they reap profits only because they have reallocated resources to the benefit of consumers. Creating a system where work and risk taking are massively rewarded is consistent with the asserted goals of the Rawlsian project because the poor have always prospered when capitalism is adopted, and no country that has tried anything else has broken out of poverty.

Jeremy Jackson and Jeffrey Palm argue in “The Limits of Redistribution and the Impossibility of Egalitarian Ends” that the ultimate goal of an egalitarian philosophy is an equal (just) distribution of resources. They outline the historical progression of the egalitarian philosophy and argue that, short of a totalitarian regime, the objective of

an equal distribution is utterly impossible. The impossibility of an equal distribution of wealth is derived from the impossibility of redistributing *social* capital. It is fundamentally impossible to take social capital or a social network from one person and give it to another. Can the outlooks of children raised by loving, supportive parents be taken from them and transferred to children from neglectful homes? Yet social capital—the trust and norms of civic cooperation that are essential to well-functioning societies—enhances productive capabilities and labor-market returns. Jackson and Palm also extend this impossibility of redistribution to the recent focus on inequality in well-being.

In their essay, Art Carden, Sarah Estelle, and Anne Bradley ably argue that “we’ll never be royals, but that doesn’t matter.” Their key point is that inequality doesn’t really matter much in comparison to poverty, and the good news is that we are rapidly conquering absolute poverty around the world. A society in which people are equally poor has far less scope for flourishing than one in which people are unequally rich—as are Americans today. The largest exodus of humans out of absolute poverty in the history of our species, which we have recently witnessed, has happened not because of redistribution from rich to poor but because of increased economic growth brought about by improved institutions and a new esteem for innovation. With enough force, we could equalize incomes and wealth through taxation, but we cannot forget how people respond to taxes. Many people are motivated by the pursuit of status, so taxing income-generating production and utility-generating consumption will induce people to shift toward other ways of satisfying their wants. Closing off the financial means to status will lead people to seek status on other margins, but these margins are often not benign.

In “Flat Is Fair: American Public Opinion on Taxes and the Myth of Egalitarianism,” Brain Gaines uses public-opinion surveys to directly measure Americans’ attitudes toward egalitarianism. Although it is widely believed that most Americans would prefer that the rich pay higher taxes than they currently do, he demonstrates that evidence of this preference in public-opinion surveys is quite weak. The clearest and sharpest questions reveal instead that Americans favor rather flat and low taxes and consider present tax rates on above-median incomes as suitably high or even excessive. Americans embrace equal treatment through (mostly) proportional taxation much more than through the equalizing of incomes or wealth via (highly) progressive taxes. When thinking about taxes, then, most Americans come closer to holding classical than modern liberal views.

Would you rather live in a society where incomes and wealth are relatively equal or in one where they aren’t very equal? Although many people instinctively lean toward the first choice, Edward Stringham cautions in “Should We Be Pushing for More Equality of Income and Wealth?” that the choice isn’t so simple. Make sure to take the questionnaire in his essay, through which he demonstrates that relative income/wealth and absolute income/wealth don’t necessarily go hand in hand. He points out that if one measures equality in rich countries as access to particular technologies, then we have much more equality than ever, even if relative income or wealth has diverged greatly.

Then he demonstrates that one of the biggest problems with egalitarianism is that it negatively judges how people get richer at different rates, even if everyone in society is getting richer in the process. Although any policy marketed as “We want to keep everyone more equal and poor” sounds absurd, Stringham warns that many policies effectively do just that—as he amply demonstrates in the case of Social Security. Egalitarianism is often driven by envy and encourages people to treat others’ property as if it is not theirs. He concludes that modern egalitarian policies that reduce the rewards for increasing skills, working, or investing do not bring about the fully disastrous results of pure egalitarianism, but egalitarianism is still mildly disastrous and inhumane even in milder doses.

“Inequality: First, Do No Harm” by Vincent Geloso and Steven Horwitz closes out the symposium. Clearly, last does not mean least in this case—this essay was strongly considered for the Independent Excellence Prize. This essay does more than any of the others to grapple with measures of inequality, which so fascinate economists and on which much of the recent policy push rests. Geloso and Horwitz begin by demonstrating that a significant portion of the recent putative rise in inequality results from mismeasurement. They highlight, for example, the importance of adequately measuring regional differences in the cost of living, considering changes in household size across the income distribution, and examining consumption inequality rather than focusing on pretax income. Their bigger point is that a rise in economic inequality might be a bad thing or might be a good thing. They accordingly divide recent changes into “good” (socially beneficial) inequalities and “bad” (socially harmful) inequalities. Good inequalities result from the satisfaction of individual economic preferences or demographic changes and have no perverse impact on economic growth, whereas bad inequalities generally stem from government policies that push down the left tail of the income distribution (such as agricultural policies, zoning laws, and the war on drugs) while pulling up the right tail (such as bank bailouts and regulations that create barriers to entry into markets). They see the reversal of these bad policies as the appropriate focus of inequality reduction. In the face of harmful policies, as in medicine, we must “first, do no harm.”

If Geloso and Horwitz had more space, they could have brought into their discussion additional measures of inequality as well. Each semester, to give my students a sense of inequality and the meaning of various Gini coefficient levels, I ask them to anonymously report how many pairs of shoes they own. The results are always fascinating. A few report that, like me, they own three or four pairs. The median is usually about a dozen, but there are always a few who own thirty or sixty or (occasionally) even one hundred pairs. The shoe Gini coefficient for my students is usually pretty close to the income Gini coefficient for the United States. However, when I ask them how many pairs of shoes they are currently wearing, the answer is always one for every single person—giving a Gini coefficient of zero. Whereas there are immense differences in shoe ownership, there is no inequality in shoe “adequacy.”¹

1. One might argue that zero shoes is perfectly adequate in some cases as well.

Life itself is far more important than shoes, income, or wealth. Sam Peltzman (2009) has shown that the inequality of life spans fell tremendously during the twentieth century in the United States and every other country studied. Perhaps the modern preoccupation with income inequality has arisen because we have become much more equal in other things, such as life expectancy, literacy, and fulfillment of basic needs? These things were the low-hanging, nutritious fruit. Many of the authors in our symposium warn that we scale the ladder to pick pricklier fruit at our own peril.

It is important to examine the dimensions of inequality along with its causes and effects. Might it be useful to approach the topic from another angle by asking, “What is the *purpose* of inequality?” To consider this question, I contacted a couple dozen colleagues at Wake Forest University who teach in a wide variety of disciplines—biology, economics, history, philosophy, political science, psychology, religious studies, sociology, and women’s studies—and, promising them anonymity, asked them, “From the point of view of someone in your field, what is the purpose of inequality?”

Several were hesitant in answering. For example, one replied that “political scientists don’t usually talk about inequality in terms of purpose. The focus tends to be on what *causes/creates* inequalities and what the *consequences* are for political power. So I’ve got to admit that I have trouble imagining what its purpose is.” Another noted that “from the point of view of psychology, inequality would not be seen as serving any particular purpose *per se*.”

Despite this hesitancy, the range of responses gives considerable food for thought. Some respondents had pithy answers, such as a historian who explained that inequality “is all about power. By deeming one group inferior, the other group is able to maintain all economic, political, and social power. So inequality justifies the rule of a minority over the majority. It also justifies the rule of one sex, race, ethnicity, or religion over others.” A faculty member in women’s studies echoed this view and concluded, after a discussion of Friedrich Engels and Gerda Lerner, that the “purpose of inequality today is still the same as it was in the past in many ways . . . maintaining power in social and in economic contexts.” Several were blunt in their embrace of egalitarian assumptions, with one asserting that in an “egalitarian society such as ours, the starting point is absolute equality.”

In contrast, a biologist explained that one reason animals are unequal in terms of size and other features is “to expand resource bases, and reduce competition for food, or [to] allow specialization” in getting food. Another biologist elaborated that “inequality is likely an inevitable feature of any complex natural system.” Although he didn’t see a purpose to this feature, he commented that because “the biochemical processes of cellular reproduction are subject to error, mutations are inevitable, and all large populations will therefore contain genetic variation. . . . Among humans, for example, dark skin near the equator protects folic acid, an essential metabolite, from destruction by ultraviolet light. In contrast, dark skin closer to the poles can prevent

adequate synthesis of vitamin D, which is dependent on ultraviolet light. Presumably, genetic variation in our ancestors as they spread from our African birthplace . . . led to environment-specific variation in skin color.” One might conclude that the function (purpose?) of this inequality is—as the other biologist noted—to allow species, including humans, to flourish in a wider variety of settings and to create the greatest possible value out of limited resources.

A colleague in psychology noted that the “prevailing theories of group process assume that membership in groups contributes to important aspects of our self-concept—our social identity. Generally, we strive to maintain and obtain a positive social identity. Social comparisons among groups is one psychological mechanism by which we accomplish this goal—downward social comparisons to relatively ‘inferior’ groups . . . contribute to [an] enhanced sense of positive social identity, whereas upward social comparisons to higher status groups is a threat to positive social identity. However, these upward social comparisons can set the stage for upward mobility when group boundaries are permeable.” In this light, the purpose of inequality might be to make most people (except those at the bottom) have a positive self-image.

A sociologist noted that “most sociology . . . is premised on egalitarian ideals and so the idea that inequality has some purpose (other than the nefarious purpose of advantaging some people and disadvantaging others) doesn’t get much consideration.” One exception is the functionalist school of sociology, which contends that “stratification is functionally necessary to motivate people to undergo the sacrifices necessary to do certain functionally important jobs for which necessary talents are scarce.” He cited Herbert Gans’s essay “The Positive Functions of Poverty” (1972), which includes ideas such as “the existence of poverty makes sure that ‘dirty work’ is done” (278). This focus on the power of incentives will appeal to most economists, who would add that inequality is needed to get “clean work” done, too.² The supply of engineers, scientists, doctors, entrepreneurs, and others who do work that requires much training and effort would be fairly paltry if the rewards were scant.

This point is related to an answer supplied by a colleague in economics, who wrote, “One effect of inequality (in resources, skills, whatever) is to generate differences in relative prices, which provide opportunities for exchange and gains from trade.” If you have studied comparative advantage and the gains from trade in models descended from David Ricardo, you may have noticed that if everyone has the same opportunity cost, then there is no comparative advantage, and no one gains from trading with each other. The immense gains we all get from trading with each other arise *because* we are unequal in our characteristics and talents—differences that may be innate or that we may have developed so that we can gain from trading with each other. The economics colleague quoted Jonathan Sacks, chief rabbi of Great Britain,

2. An economist might also note that “dirty work” will usually generate a *positive* compensating wage differential.

who explains that “it is through exchange that difference becomes a blessing, not a curse” (2003, 22).

A scholar of religion argued that “from the Jewish–Christian prophetic perspective, inequality is a *symptom* of injustice, which God emphatically stands against. So the ‘purpose’ of inequality, we might say, is that it raises the ‘red flag’ of injustice and should arouse the appropriate responses of compassion, care, and giving. Perhaps that is one answer to your question.”

Finally, a colleague in philosophy turned this idea around by arguing that God is the source of inequality. He explained that from his Thomistic point of view,³

most fundamentally, the purpose of inequality in creation is to show forth the Goodness of God. Roughly put, the perfection of Creation consists at least in part in goodness being displayed in all of its various degrees. Conversely, the universe would not be perfect if it displayed only one degree of goodness. It displays all degrees of goodness, even lesser goods. God in his wisdom has decreed the *distinction* of things, one from another. . . . Man differs formally from salamander. . . . These distinctions entail inequality—the elements are less perfect than plants, plants less perfect than animals, brute animals less perfect than rational animals (man). So God as the source of the distinction of things is the source of their inequality.

Since God created people unequal, He must have had a purpose in mind. Perhaps one purpose of inequality is that it can allow us to gain the happiness of heaven by knowing, loving, and serving God in this world. Perhaps the purpose of inequality is to teach us humility, to instill in us the ability to accept things from others, to encourage and oblige us to practice generosity and kindness.

In summary, many scholars see no real purpose of inequality. Others, such as some of my colleagues discussed earlier, see in inequality only the nefarious purposes of those who presumably wield power. A few, such as biologists and economists, often find more beneficial purposes in inequality. The philosopher can see even deeper purposes.

Lay philosopher C. S. Lewis considers the modern egalitarian impulse in his essay “Screwtape Proposes a Toast” (1959). The scene is in Hell at the annual dinner of the Tempters’ Training College for young devils. Screwtape notes that

democracy is the word with which you must lead them by the nose. . . . And of course it is connected with the political ideal that men should be equally treated. You then make a stealthy transition in their minds from this political

3. His argument, my colleague explained, is a summing up of Thomas Aquinas: “Worth noting: in that passage, St. Thomas does not say that the purpose of inequality is to show forth the Glory of God. That’s my gloss. St. Thomas doesn’t address that specific question there. Nor can I think offhand of where he does address that specific question, but I do think it follows from his views on the point of Creation in the first place. He argues that God creates solely in order to communicate his goodness (to share his goodness with something).” For Thomas’s views, see Thomas Aquinas n.d.

ideal to a factual belief that all men *are* equal. . . . As a result you can use the word *democracy* to sanction in his thought the most degrading . . . of human feelings. . . . The claim of equality, outside the strictly political field, is made only by those who feel themselves to be in some way inferior. . . . [One] therefore resents every kind of superiority in others; denigrates it; wishes its annihilation. . . . Under the name of Envy it has been known to humans for thousands of year. But hitherto they always regarded it as the most odious, and also the most comical, of vices. . . . The delightful novelty of the present situation is that you can . . . make it respectable and even laudable—by the incantatory use of the word *democratic*.

As Lewis avers, our differences could teach us humility and other virtues, but the culture now seems rigged so that our inequalities instead teach us outrage and vice.

Inequality is exquisitely beautiful, but it can also be grossly ugly. Because this is true, the question becomes how we should properly respond to it. Will our response to it be ugly, say by envying or injuring those who have ended up with more than we have or by belittling and mistreating those who have less? Or will we see the dignity in all people—great and small—and treat others with respect, cooperating with them to fulfill that promise by achieving the virtue, prosperity, and peace that we all desire?

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