

INTRODUCTION

The Errors of Egalitarianism

Tibor R. Machan

IT WOULD BE HARD to find someone who has no sympathies whatever with even the most radical version of egalitarianism. When we witness glaring discrepancies (what some call “harsh inequalities”) in wealth or opportunity between people who otherwise seem alike in every important respect, we tend to find that disturbing.

The inequality seems especially harsh when those deficiently blessed are working hard, “playing by the rules,” and so forth, while those more abundantly blessed seem to have acquired their plentitude by mere luck—perhaps by being born into “the right” family—not by any special exercise of prudence, wisdom, or other virtues. It seems unfair, and the intuition or commonsense impression is that, somehow, what is unfair should be made more fair.

Exactly what people mean by fairness tends to vary, however.

There is the somewhat primitive notion of fairness, according to which benefits and harms are seen to be fairly or unfairly distributed in relation to how parents tend to divide them in a household. But a family is a special context, and what fairness means in households is not morally primary; it derives from the obligation of the parent to care for all the children in that household (but not, for example,

the kids down the street or in another country). If fairness as practiced in households *were* morally primary, we would be justified in demanding that parents care not only for their own children but also for all children.¹ Even in an intuitionist view of ethics, according to which our moral obligations rest on deep-seated feelings about right and wrong, this notion does not seem to hold water. And as a matter of common sense, it is clear that trying to care for millions of kids simultaneously could lead to some obvious neglect of one's own kids, an apparent lapse of fairness. Collectivized child-rearing—letting the state function as parent, as Plato proposed—would be one logical end of the line of this approach. But again, most parents would recoil at the prospect of turning their progeny over to the government altogether.

But there is also the more plausible concern with fairness that we have noted, namely, that some people are facing dire straits through no fault of their own even as others enjoy luxury, ease, and unlimited vistas through no merit of their own. Some philosophers, Kai Nielsen² and Ronald Dworkin³ for instance, go so far as to argue that the foremost public priority, coming even before liberty, should be to establish a condition of equality among human beings with respect to the distribution of benefits and harms (or, in Dworkin's argument, with respect to prospects for flourishing). They hold that the duty of public authorities is not to protect the rights of the individual to liberty but to establish a condition of more or less strict equality. There is, they suggest, a basic *right to equality*.

Radical egalitarians aim to ensure, via law and public policy, that

1. In some normative views it is. In the People's Republic of China some years ago, during a flood, when a father rescued another child instead of his own, his sacrifice was hailed for being consistent with communist virtue.

2. Kai Nielsen, *Equality and Liberty: A Defense of Radical Egalitarianism* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1986).

3. Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

The Errors of Egalitarianism / xiii

we all get the same benefits in society, the same health care, the same education, the same Internet access, the same everything. Despite the claim that “equal concern does not mean that government must ensure that everyone has the same wealth, no matter what,”⁴ less radical versions veer inexorably in the same direction, pulled by the logic of the position. This is especially true now that modern liberals have regained their ideological prominence in the wake of the ideological collapse of the conservatives in the U.S. Congress, not to mention in Britain and Europe generally. Conservative politicians in particular have lost all credibility as principled defenders of small government and individual liberty, making the job of the disloyal opposition easier.⁵

Dworkin’s approach is of special interest here because he claims to hold a position many contemporary defenders of the market (outside of politics) also embrace: ethical individualism. At first glance, his account is not very different from what I call classical individualism:⁶ he believes “that it is objectively important that any human life, once begun, succeed rather than fail—that the potential of that life be realized rather than wasted—and that this is equally objectively important in the case of each human life.”⁷ Perhaps surprisingly, Dworkin also believes that “one person—the person

4. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

5. It is not possible to defend the free system against incursions of egalitarian regimentation as a matter of principle when other types of regimentation are championed. Conservatives, for example, want subsidies and protectionist measures for business, or restrictions on personal conduct such as gambling and drug abuse. Once these exceptions to individual liberty are granted, the plea for yet other exceptions cannot be resisted as a matter of principle. This is becoming evident even vis-à-vis freedom of speech, as both liberals and conservatives make allowances for limiting it, whether to protect flags or political correctness.

6. Tibor R. Machan, *Classical Individualism: The Supreme Importance of Each Human Being* (London: Routledge, 1998). See also David L. Norton, *Personal Destinies: A Philosophy of Ethical Individualism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976) and, more radically, Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism* (New York: New American Library, 1961).

7. Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue*, p. 448.

whose life it is—has a special responsibility for each life, and that in virtue of that special responsibility he or she has a right to make the fundamental decisions that define, for him, what a successful life would be.”⁸

This kind of fundamental regard for personal autonomy would seem to be sharply at odds with coercive egalitarianism. But Dworkin goes on to claim that “in constructing a theory of political morality,” we will indeed arrive at “an egalitarian theory, because [public morality] will insist that government must treat the life of each person it governs as having great and equal importance, and construct its economic and other structures and policies with that egalitarian principle in mind.”⁹

But Dworkin makes an invalid jump here—from what individuals are responsible for, to what *governments* are responsible for. And his claim is self-contradictory. If we accept that governments must engage in the equalizing process claimed to be their function, they will end up squelching the individual autonomy the ultimate value of which is said to justify egalitarian rule in the first place. If every time an individual achieves something beyond what has been accomplished by others, one must give it up—no matter how personally valuable to oneself—then that person will hardly be responsible *in fact* for making a success of his or her own life, of developing his or her potentials wisely or managing assets prudently. One will have less of a chance than one would under freedom either to excel or fail at what is, by Dworkin’s own characterization, a personal moral project, one that in Robert Nozick’s phrase requires “moral space” and thus may not be constricted by government and other uninvited agents.¹⁰ Instead one will be thwarted and undermined at

8. *Ibid.*, p. 449.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), p. 57. It is not clear that Dworkin grasps the legal preconditions for exercising personal responsibility. He does not discuss free will, but his discussion of

The Errors of Egalitarianism / xv

every turn. Dworkin ignores the fact that (adult) personal success is self-initiated, self-guided, and self-experienced. It simply cannot be divinely distributed and mandated by a governmental central planner.

Apart from the paradox in Dworkin's stance, is there any merit to the egalitarian thesis?¹¹ Is it in any basic respect superior to the idea it opposes, to wit, that the first duty of a community's legal authorities is "to secure these rights," rights "to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"?

The contributors to this volume deal with many of the questions that arise in considerable detail. Here I can give only a few hints of certain fundamental philosophical difficulties with the egalitarian stance.

There is the problem, for example, that to bring about the requisite equality there must be a group of persons quite unequal to everyone else in their power to impose their will! ("All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others.") Even if the process begins democratically, the delegation of the kind of power needed to establish strong equality would rapidly render the administrators of public affairs significantly unequal in their power over others. The master and the servant do not enjoy the same level of control over each other.

When John Rawls argues that we need equal distribution of wealth, except when unequal distribution is to everyone's benefit, the policies designed to achieve this goal will have to be imposed

ethical individualism suggests that he holds the view that morality requires it. After all, how else could one be personally responsible? In Rawls, however, we do see a direct smack at free will, one that renders his support of egalitarianism more coherent than Dworkin's. See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 104.

11. The claim that the capitalism or quasi capitalism of the past engendered the phenomenon of the rich getting richer while the poor get poorer is strongly disputed in Robert W. Fogel, *The Fourth Great Awakening and the Future of Egalitarianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

by people whose power to bring it about (or even to make the determination about what is the “best” mix of equality and inequality) puts them on a different playing field from the rest of us. On the other hand, if in keeping with the egalitarian ideal no one is allowed more power over others than anybody else, then what we have is a free society, in which inequalities of various kinds will pile up willy-nilly anyway, as they always do when a human society is free. And this points up a certain incoherence in the egalitarian ideal, suggesting that it is unworkable from the get-go.

There are problems with the assumptions underlying egalitarianism as well. As developed by Rawls, for example, the theory claims that everyone is ultimately in the same boat, morally speaking. None of us, for example, morally deserves any special advantages. This is because our character depends “in large part on fortunate family and social circumstances for which [one] can claim no credit.”¹²

In this view, none of us has very much to do with how we turn out, for better or for worse. When some of us end up better situated than others, this can have nothing to do with personal effort and achievement, only with luck. Nor is anybody responsible for failures, or for acting as a predator or oppressor of others. We are, morally speaking, all the same, neither better nor worse, neither more nor less deserving of the advantages we enjoy in life. All merely happens as it must. And since we are all in the same boat, a

12. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 104. It is interesting that Rawls draws much of his ammunition here from someone who, in opposition to him, supported laissez-faire, namely, Frank Knight, *Selected Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). Rawls credits Knight in his book (p. 311) but does not heed Knight’s concern about empowering the state to remedy the unfairness. I would, however, dispute that there is anything at all unfair in someone’s possession of undeserved assets. So long as these assets were not stolen or otherwise unjustly obtained—and one certainly cannot argue that the beauty of a supermodel or height of a champion basketball player are so obtained—there is nothing morally objectionable afoot here. Moral wrongs have to do with choices, not genetic inheritance.

The Errors of Egalitarianism / xvii

team, we are committed to sharing our benefits and burdens. Again, of course, some are more equal than others when it comes to actually organizing society along alleged egalitarian lines. Furthermore, those who accept the Rawlsian viewpoint would, one may assume, be regarded as morally more astute, even more worthwhile, than those who reject it, so much so that the former would be justified in coercing the latter into compliance with the social organization Rawls would like to set up.

The picture Rawls paints of our moral equality, if true, does suggest that there is something very wrong with the wide discrepancies of advantages in people's lives. If it just happens to happen, through no one's fault or credit at all, that a great many people are struggling to get by while a select few like Bill Gates are inordinately well off, that would certainly be morally problematic. Although such a purely accidental allotment of triumphs and tribulations could not by itself justify attempts to flatten the status quo, it would be the beginning of the case for such reform. If, in addition, we are all on same team, belonging together, all equally responsible for each other, this moral duty, combined with the first condition, might justify mandatory sharing of the team's benefits and burdens.¹³

Philosophers Peter Unger and Peter Singer call for just such reform in their books *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence*¹⁴ and *Practical Ethics*.¹⁵ As Unger puts it, "On pain of living

13. I discuss the sort of moral issue involved here in Tibor R. Machan, *Generosity: Virtue in Civil Society* (Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, 1998). Suffice it to say that whatever moral responsibilities to help those in need we may have, we may not be coerced into fulfilling them unless a prior commitment is involved, as when parents are obliged to help their children, or an insurance firm is obliged to help its clients in event of a disaster covered under its policy.

14. Peter Unger, *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

15. Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

a life that's seriously immoral, a typical well-off person, like you and me, must give away most of her financially valuable assets, and much of her income, directing the funds to lessen efficiently the serious suffering of others."

Unger's claim isn't merely a lament. Nor is it merely a call for some measure of generosity, either local or global. It is, rather, a demand for the coercive redistribution of wealth. Yet it is also a call for personal conduct that is supposedly consistent with morality or ethics. Under the Ungerian ethic, all of us should work for drastic reforms in the political systems in which Westerners happen to live with all the wealth they happen to have. Egalitarianism is thus both a political and a moral crusade, demanding that people do the right thing via their political institutions and, when it comes to their personal conduct, demanding that they give away all of their own wealth beyond whatever is deemed subsistence level.

Yet the call for the mandatory redistribution of benefits and harms via public policy, and the imperative to exercise personal generosity and charity, go contrary to the original Rawlsian assumption that none of us can help what we are and do, and can be assigned no credit or blame for what we have done or not done.¹⁶ And therein lies the rub: no one can agree to support egalitarian public policy or personal morality if no one has any control over his or her own conduct.

To say, "One *ought to* establish public policies that equalize economic and other relevant conditions among people throughout the world" is to implore people *to do something they may or may not choose to do*. It assumes that they are able to choose what they will think, how they will act. It assumes *moral self-responsibility*. Yet moral responsibility cannot be attributed if Rawls is right and our moral

16. Tom Palmer suggested to me that Rawls's narrow type of moralism is a uniquely Kantian sort in which, although no one deserves any benefits from virtuous conduct, one can achieve higher moral status via holding the right convictions about justice and fairness—salvation by grace rather than acts.

The Errors of Egalitarianism / xix

character is not of our own making but is merely a predetermined epiphenomenon of “family and social circumstances for which [one] can claim no credit” nor blame. *Que sera, sera*, all the way down, as it were.

But if we do have the chance to make moral choices in our lives, then at least the Rawlsian egalitarian project is incoherent. Because then not all of us who find ourselves in dire straits absolutely had to be. And some are there through no fault of their own but through the clear fault of others, who are then morally responsible themselves.¹⁷

Nor need all those with greater advantages have failed to deserve them.¹⁸ It is not only luck that led to Bill Gates being a billionaire while many others were barely getting by from month to month, with little to set aside for rainy days. Bill Gates may have been born with talents or potentials that others were not born with, but he then had to choose to diligently exercise and develop that capacity. Our fate does have something to do with our choices, even if our choices are not *all* that matter.¹⁹ And if one cannot reap the fruits of those choices, there is serious injustice afoot in the society. If

17. For more on this, see Tibor R. Machan, *Initiative: Human Agency and Society* (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 2000).

18. For a challenging discussion of the alleged connection between desert and justice, see Gillian Brock, “Just Deserts and Needs,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 37 (1999): 165–88. It should be noted, though, that not all defenders of justice as consisting primarily of respect for and protection of individual rights to life, liberty, and property rest on the belief that one deserves one’s belongings. No one can argue that someone deserves both eyes or two kidneys, yet it does not follow at all that one has no right to these and others need not respect, nor may one protect this right. One can well argue that no one deserves to have one’s eyes plucked out.

19. Here it may be worth noting that quite apart from any achievement or failure related to economic well-being, there can be many people for whom a modest economic prosperity is all they may require to flourish in life. One size does not fit all; some create wealth, some art, some philosophy, and many are willing to live with what they they are able to get through these endeavors.

morality is to make sense at all, then we are *not* all in the same boat as far as our achievements or failures are concerned.

Now if that is so, an egalitarian regime would run counter to justice by running counter to these choices. It would also unjustly exculpate oppressors everywhere who, for sure, did not have to impose their tyrannical measures on others and thereby produce the dire straits that tyranny tends to produce. All those famines in countries where productivity is thwarted by regimes that pillage wealth instead of making it possible for people to keep what they produce (like Ethiopia and its neighbors) cannot be prevented by redistributing wealth. It is precisely such redistribution and pillaging that kills the goose that lays the golden egg, stifling productivity by unjustly depriving people of the fruits of their work, ingenuity, and, yes, even luck. Famines must be fought through investment, long-term planning, and, most of all, the establishment of private property rights that allow people to invest and plan.

Indeed, if wealth were completely equally divided throughout the world, this division would result in everyone's having extremely little so that hardly any projects costing considerable sums could be supported. One advantage of the wealthy to the poor is that the wealthy can invest in costly enterprises that the poor can use, at least now and then. It is an odd kind of universal humanitarianism that must lay waste to all human endeavor. But such is the only possible end game of an adamantly egalitarian public policy.

Another basic flaw in the Rawlsian framework is the assumption that if no one deserves advantages in life, it follows that others are authorized to redistribute the total sum of advantages according to a scheme of fairness. That is a non sequitur. Where does this authority come from, given that it involves subjecting millions of persons to measures they may well not have accepted on their own?

In any case, throughout nature, including human social life,

The Errors of Egalitarianism / xxi

ranking is unavoidable.²⁰ Differences emerge, persist, and have an impact. No matter how much one might wish for a different kind of universe, there will always be better and worse cases of human conduct, institutions, products, and so on. It is telling that not even those who preach full egalitarianism can stick to their principles.

As an example, consider that famous liberal institution, National Public Radio. The sheer limitation of time requires selectivity. NPR's bleeding-heart egalitarianism is also belied by a certain saturating elitism. The same is true of academic moral philosophy, which is dominated by egalitarian sentiments and ideas; in practice, however, academic moral philosophers are picky about whom they will admit into their ranks. Such academic stars as John Rawls and Peter Singer are all happily housed in highly ranked institutions, despite their self-proclaimed egalitarianism. And if they were not there, others would be.

Consider also that even noncommercial organizations select artists on the basis of some standard, a standard of quality and content that must include some performers and exclude others. My local noncommercial jazz and blues station constantly features favorites and highlights public performances of the more renowned artists, blatantly discriminating against the less capable and successful. Joe Lunchbucket riffing in his garage never gets the same kind of promotion, even if his display is open to the public.

The kind of impossible egalitarianism preached by socialists and other sentimentalists is not an option. All we can aspire to do is

20. For a satirical depiction of what extreme egalitarianism would look like, see Kurt Vonnegut Jr., "Harrison Bergeron," *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* (October 1961). "The year was 2081, and everybody was finally equal. They weren't only equal before God and the law. They were equal every which way. Nobody was smarter than anybody else. Nobody was better looking than anybody else. Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else. All this equality was due to the 211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments to the Constitution, and to the unceasing vigilance of agents of the United States Handicapper General."

rank on the basis of valid standards, ones that may be difficult to identify but that we are nonetheless responsible for discovering and applying. Most of nature is differentiated mainly by reference to power or fitness for physical survival. But human beings have the power to choose how we approach the ranking that is inherent in all of nature. In human affairs, such ranking needs to be rationally justified, based on merit, and carried out with justice and with respect for basic rights.

The Declaration of Independence tells us that that “all men are created equal.” Ever since, critics of the idea of the free society have argued that this is nonsense because, in fact, we are quite evidently not all created equal. Indeed, they stress, the truth is we ought to be equal—it is only fair and just—but we are not. Nature bungled. Accordingly, force should be deployed in society not primarily to combat criminal conduct but to make us all equal in all important respects.

Of course, the Declaration was referring to equality of rights, equality of legal status in society. Men are said to be “created equal” in the respect of possessing unalienable rights to, among other conditions, “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” In other words, we are all rights possessors. That does not mean we are—or should be—equal in our height, fortune, intelligence, looks, or talents.

The point of the Declaration’s limited egalitarianism—if we want to characterize it in such terms—is to stress a distinctive requirement of organized social life. Despite all the clear and undeniable differences among human beings, there are some basic principles we ought to respect and protect, namely, our fundamental rights as agents of our choices. Any kind of broader egalitarianism is both impossible and, to the extent that its incoherent program is coercively imposed, blatantly unjust.

That is not, however, how many famous thinkers approach the matter. Consider the late Isaiah Berlin, who said that “the assumption is that equality needs no reasons, only inequality does so. . . .

The Errors of Egalitarianism / xxiii

If I have a cake and there are ten persons among whom I wish to divide it, then if I give exactly one tenth to each, this will not, at any rate automatically, call for justification: whereas if I depart from this principle of equal division I am expected to produce a special reason.”²¹ This same notion is developed in great detail by Dworkin.

Yet the case for full equality does not prove what it tries to prove. Berlin’s remark, for example, only shows what is expected of one who sets out to divide things within a group, as when parents distribute benefits among children, coaches among teammates, and so forth. But again, as when the moral obligations within a family are taken as applying to all situations whatever, a particular circumstance is here being universalized without warrant. After all, there are many occasions when *unequal* distribution is accepted as self-evidently appropriate. Why not pick one of those as the standard and model of social organization? For example, if one gives Christmas gifts and does so quite unequally, depending on how close one is to the recipient, that is taken for granted as normal.

But more fundamental than either equality or inequality as such is the nature of human beings as rational animals and, given that nature, the rightness of being able to choose one’s own path, voluntarily. The fact that all human beings possess rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness equally depends first on recognizing how and why any given individual, in respect of his or her human characteristics, could possess such a right. Then it becomes clear that other individuals possessing the same characteristics must also have rights of the same general kind.

Most of these remarks bear on the moral status of equality and pay little heed to the practical prospects of securing it. We have noted, though, that Rawls is aware of some of the adverse results

21. Isaiah Berlin, “Equality,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 56 (1955–1956): 132.

xxiv / *Tibor R. Machan*

of such a policy since he exempts inequalities that will produce benefits all around. As the saying goes, a rising tide lifts all boats, large, medium, or small. And it seems clear, even to Rawls, that unequal distribution of resources, initial or otherwise, tends to engender productivity, mainly by virtue of leaving incentives in place that are undoubtedly contrary to egalitarian principles.²²

Although this is not a decisive reason to forgo attempts to secure economic and other equality, it does suggest the problem with attempting to do so. It also suggests a main reason why egalitarianism is morally troublesome: it fails to come to terms with the fact that not all inequalities among human beings are accidental, a matter merely of bad luck. People also often *become* or *remain* unequal, in virtue of acting in laudable or not-so-laudable ways, of their own volition. They do not just happen to turn out that way. And to attempt to ram everyone into the same procrustean bed would not only be destructive of the general welfare but also cripple the ability to choose morally.

22. For a clear indication of this, see James L. Payne, *Costly Returns, Burdens of the US Tax System* (San Francisco: ICS Press, 1993).