

# What Egalitarianism Is Not<sup>1</sup>

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Egalitarians suffer from a typical philosophical confusion. We know that we believe in equality, but we don't seem to be able to say what equality is. Part of the reason, no doubt, is that there are genuine disputes about what equality involves. But in this paper, I will argue that a central reason is that egalitarianism is a rather complex system of beliefs which upsets several philosophical prejudices. Various pictures 'hold us captive', so that we are unable to see the character of the belief-system before us.<sup>2</sup> By uncovering this complexity and these prejudices we may hope to avoid the idea that egalitarianism must take a certain shape: that it must consist of a single, ultimate, immutable principle of a single form. We will then be free to engage in the really difficult work of giving an adequate account of what egalitarianism is.<sup>3</sup>

## 1. Egalitarianism is not a belief in a single principle

The first prejudice philosophers are likely to have is the idea that egalitarianism must be a belief in a single principle. Nobody would think that about Christianity or Buddhism, but then they have the advantage that their names derive from a founder and not a concept. Yet these examples remind us that names of systems of belief are inevitably forms of shorthand. They need to be deciphered.

What, then, does the name 'egalitarianism' stand for? Not that it is a belief in a single, simple thing called equality, but that the beliefs it involves do somehow derive from or revolve around that concept. It is perfectly intelligible to suppose that egalitarianism comprises a number of beliefs, each of which can be construed somehow as a principle of equality. There is no need for them to have any more in common than that.

If we look at the beliefs of people who consider themselves egalitarians, we actually find a variety of principles. Here are some of the beliefs I'd include:<sup>4</sup>

- (1) Everyone has the right to the satisfaction of their basic needs; in a good society everyone would have not just a bearable existence, but the prospect of a satisfying, fulfilling life.
- (2) No one should be degraded or exploited. Everyone should have the same social status.
- (3) There should be much more equality of income and wealth. There should be equality in production, involving democratic control of the economy and of the workplace, and the right of everyone to safe, dignified, useful, and engaging

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was written in 1990 and never published for what may appear to be obvious reasons! It may nevertheless be useful to someone which is why I offer it here.

<sup>2</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1968), § 115. It should be obvious that the whole character of this paper is inspired by the *Philosophical Investigations*; I trust it will not be necessary to multiply cross-references.

<sup>3</sup> I would like to thank Vincent Browne, G.A. Cohen, and R.M. Hare for their comments on a previous draft of this paper, which was presented to the XVIII World Congress of Philosophy.

<sup>4</sup> See John Baker, *Arguing for Equality* (London: Verso, 1987), ch. 1.

work. Everyone should be able to develop their individual talents in a satisfying and fulfilling way.

- (4) Civil rights like free speech and free assembly should be defended, but institutions should be developed to give formal freedoms real bite, and to give their members equal power.
- (5) No one should be treated worse than others because of their sex or sexual preference, their colour or culture, their religion or lack of it, or for any other irrelevant reason.

Of course, not every contemporary egalitarian will subscribe to just these beliefs, but I am reasonably confident that most real-life egalitarians would have a set of beliefs at this level of complexity.

When philosophers are confronted with this complexity, they tend to say that it is derivative of some more fundamental belief which is the essence of egalitarianism. But none of the candidates proposed for this role is up to the job. Consider the principle of equal well-being.<sup>5</sup> It is a plausible principle, but it clearly goes considerably beyond the beliefs I have listed. Egalitarians, as far as I can see, are simply not committed to rectifying every cause of inequality of well-being (political frustration, expensive tastes, philosophical ennui) - which is what makes these so useful to Dworkin in his attack on equal welfare.<sup>6</sup> And although egalitarians are sensitive to systematic or extreme differences in esteem, affection, job-satisfaction, and overall contentment with life, they are by no means committed to evening out these differences completely. All that can really plausibly be said is that some egalitarian beliefs involve something like equal well-being within limited spheres: for instance, the belief in satisfying basic needs might be construed as a belief that everyone should be brought up to the same level of basic well-being.

If equal well-being is too strong a principle, then equality of resources in the form defended by Dworkin is too weak.<sup>7</sup> Dworkin's theory is essentially a refinement of the liberal idea of equality of opportunity. Although he distances himself from what he calls the 'starting gate theory of justice', 'resources' here are still things which people use to further their interests in a manner which could lead to major inequalities of need-satisfaction, life-fulfilment, status, income, and economic power, and thus to results well outside what is typically countenanced by egalitarians. Dworkin rightly argues that any theory of equality must go beyond pre-analytic dogma, but his theory moves so far away from everyday egalitarianism that it fails to count as an elucidation of that outlook at all.

A third single-principle theory is that everyone should have a roughly equal level of the kinds of thing Rawls calls primary social goods.<sup>8</sup> By contrast with Dworkin, this could

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<sup>5</sup> G.W. Mortimore, 'An Ideal of Equality' *Mind* 77 (1968).

<sup>6</sup> Ronald Dworkin, 'What is Equality?' (in two Parts) *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 10 (1981).

<sup>7</sup> 'What is Equality?', Part II.

<sup>8</sup> See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), and 'Social unity and primary goods' in Amartya Sen & Bernard Williams (eds.), *Utilitarianism and beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 159-186.

be seen as an equality of 'results' rather than of 'opportunity', although that terminology is not wholly satisfactory because some primary goods are themselves opportunities. It would include, for instance, equality of income and wealth, of access to health care and to educational provision, of political power, of social status. And surely this is closer to real-life egalitarianism than the two principles already considered. But it is still a long way from the truth. For instance, it does not adequately encompass a commitment to the satisfaction of very different needs, nor does it seem to make room for the egalitarian ideal that everyone should have access to a satisfying occupation and to an appropriate education. These areas of egalitarianism are all sensitive to differences between people which call for differences in material provision and therefore for differences in primary social goods. That is only to say that the strengths and weaknesses of this principle are complementary to those of equal well-being. We might say that equality of well-being is too sensitive to personal differences, while equality of goods is too insensitive.

There is no guarantee that other candidates for single-principle egalitarianism will meet the same fate, but the examples given so far should raise our suspicions.<sup>9</sup> For real-life egalitarianism manages to combine some of the aspects of each single principle it is supposed to be based on. It may be argued that such an eclecticism runs the risk of confusion and inconsistency, but that doesn't make equality impossible. If the context makes the content of an egalitarian's outlook reasonably clear, if the potential conflict among its elements is containable, and if there are theoretical resources available for sorting out particular conflicts in particular ways, egalitarianism can manage to survive. But where are these resources? Are they not part of egalitarianism itself? This brings me nicely to the second claim I wish to defend.

## **2. Egalitarianism is not a belief in an 'ultimate principle'**

Utilitarianism and several other moral theories are identified in terms of their allegedly ultimate principles. It seems natural to imagine that egalitarianism is of the same form: that at its base is some ultimate principle from which all its other characteristics follow. But the image is illusory, and not just because equality is not a single principle.

The main reason that it is illusory is simply that there are no such ultimate principles. This is not the place to argue the general position against foundationalism.<sup>10</sup> But the case can be illustrated by looking at a principle which is often taken to be the fundamental principle of equality, namely equal respect. First of all, that principle is extremely general and open to interpretation; thus its simple appearance is misleading. According to some philosophers, it stands for only the most minimal form of respect,<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> A recent example is G.A. Cohen, 'On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice' *Ethics* 99 (1989). His theory of equal access to advantage is much more complicated than those discussed in the text and would take much more space to unravel. It is of course quite unhelpful to say that egalitarianism can be captured by such vague formulations as 'equality of condition', since terms like 'condition' in such contexts need the same degree of explanation as 'equality' itself.

<sup>10</sup> For a range of anti-foundationalist positions, see D.Z. Phillips and H.O. Mounce, *Moral Practices* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), Sabina Lovibond, *Realism and Imagination in Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), and Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985).

<sup>11</sup> For an example, see J.R. Lucas, 'Against Equality Again' *Philosophy* 52 (1977).

while for egalitarian authors it is even at the start much more robust. Secondly, the most common way of supporting it as a fundamental principle is hopelessly incomplete.<sup>12</sup> The argument always comes to a halt with just the claim which needs to be justified: that the particular common human characteristics which are supposed to 'entitle' or 'command' or 'elicit' respect (the words are all Steven Lukes's) really do so. But this is the kind of thing that always happens when you try to conjure a belief out of thin air: you end up, at best, with an enthymeme, and at worst with an incantation.

Taken as an enthymeme, the argument might be seen as follows:

- (1) All humans have the capacity to think, to make decisions, to pursue activities they find fulfilling, and so on. (Well, almost all.)
- (2) These capacities are all very valuable. (First suppressed premise, which is itself an ethical judgment.)
- (3) Anything with valuable properties deserves our respect. (Second suppressed premise, and another ethical judgment.)

Therefore,

- (4) All humans are worthy of respect.

Once anyone sees the cans of worms opened up by that way of reading the argument, they might well be forgiven for retaining it as an incantation only. But the positive point to note is that it is indeed possible to provide arguments for so-called fundamental principles, but only by using other principles which are themselves open to further justification. 'Justification comes to an end', not at fundamental principles, but at the point at which, in a particular context and with a particular audience, it suffices to justify. That point, obviously, will be different on different occasions.

What, then, are we to make of the natural idea that some principles of equality are more fundamental than others? The idea is all right as a general rule; what is wrong is trying to put too much weight on it. To say that one principle is more fundamental than another means only that the first is a reason for the second but not vice versa. That can vary according to context, and it will fail to order such principles as are mutually reinforcing. The foundational style of thinking thus ignores the way in which, for instance, the principles of need-satisfaction and mutual respect can support each other.<sup>13</sup>

But the urge to conceive egalitarianism in terms of fundamental principles is not only an instance of a general philosophical mistake. It also leads egalitarians to oversimplify what distinguishes them from other points of view. The difference becomes a single difference, when in reality it is composed of a multitude of specific differences, held together by a whole network of reasons. And although these reasons are indeed mutually reinforcing, they are by no means so monolithic as to constitute an outlook which has a single alternative. Instead, we find in the real world a wide range of more or less anti-egalitarian positions, as well as a great diversity among egalitarian views. This diversity becomes easier to understand when we recognise that the different forms of egalitarianism are not just different interpretations of the same fundamental idea. For

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<sup>12</sup> For examples, see Bernard Williams, 'The Idea of Equality' in P. Laslett & W. G. Runciman (eds), *Philosophy, Politics and Society: second series* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, § 77, and Steven Lukes, 'Socialism and Equality' in *Essays in Social Theory* (London: Macmillan, 1977).

<sup>13</sup> See Baker, *Arguing for Equality*, pp. 18, 24.

how could a single idea have so many interpretations? The answer to this question lies in abandoning its presupposition, and in recognising that each version of egalitarianism is a complex network of beliefs supported by a complex network of argument.

The foundational conception of egalitarianism is also a practical liability. It creates the impression that the case for equality must be conducted in very abstract terms, remote from everyday moral thinking. For that is the level at which general justifications for 'respect for persons' and similar principles must proceed. By contrast, I tried to show in *Arguing for Equality* that the case for equality can be made in terms of very ordinary beliefs, beliefs which you don't have to be a philosopher to understand. The argument can thus simply by-pass the areas in which philosophers have sought to confine it, and instead of talking generally about respect for persons, it can employ more specific principles - for instance, the principle that people are not to be degraded or exploited. Even those principles are open to interpretation, and the argument is liable to break down. But without some specificity, it will never even get started.

### **3. Egalitarianism is not an immutable doctrine**

The idea that egalitarianism is a belief in a single, fundamental principle goes well with a third philosophical prejudice - that egalitarianism is a timeless, changeless doctrine. By contrast, a pluralist and anti-foundationalist approach allows for a view of egalitarianism as a changing tradition, each stage of which is a natural outgrowth of the last, but in which no stage is privileged as a final wisdom.

Philosophers are liable to see these stages as expressions of a single programme, and to assume that 'egalitarianism' must stand for a fixed set of beliefs, however complex and non-foundational: a standard against which all other beliefs may be compared. There is something right in this view and something wrong. What is right is that from any particular perspective in the history of equality, some views are going to be more egalitarian than others. Thus, for instance, the belief in equal opportunity, once at the forefront of egalitarianism, is now, in truth, a rather inegalitarian belief. This kind of unfolding of a tradition does not have to be conceptualised in terms of an ultimate idea to which various stages only approximate. It can be seen, unmetaphysically, as a process in which certain ways of thinking, combined with social change, lead on to new ways of thinking. What makes all these ways egalitarian is not that they have the same content, but that they have in fact led from one to another and that the term 'equality' has continued to have a central role in their expression.

### **4. The principles of equality are not of the same logical form**

The final claim of this paper is that the principles of equality take at least four different forms. The first, obvious, form is the equal division of a particular good. Thus, for instance, egalitarians believe that everyone should have one vote in an election,<sup>14</sup> and, more generally, certain equal rights. But another obviously egalitarian kind of principle is the rejection of certain forms of discrimination. Someone who rejects racial or sexual discrimination is not necessarily calling for the equal distribution of any particular good. Thus the two forms are quite distinct.

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<sup>14</sup> It was not always so, as J.S. Mill's endorsement of plural voting demonstrates (*Representative Government* [London: Dent, 1972], ch. 8). Yet Mill was clearly an egalitarian in his day.

Many principles of equality fall into one of these two categories. Raz has tried to demonstrate this rather formally, and I think that with a little squeezing even the rich complexity of principles listed by Rae et al could be so accommodated.<sup>15</sup> But I think Raz is wrong in excluding a third category of principle - principles of universal entitlement. For it seems clear to me that egalitarianism does include, for example, the universal right to the satisfaction of basic needs and the right not to be degraded or exploited. Raz's central objection to including such rights is that principles of this form are not always egalitarian - but this is true, as well, of principles of equal distribution (e.g. equal food or, indeed, equal welfare).

Principles of universal entitlement are egalitarian because they highlight, within a particular context, situations in which some people enjoy the good in question while others do not. This may suggest that the strictly egalitarian content of such principles is a principle of non-discrimination (if some people have x, then all should); but as Raz points out, principles of non-discrimination are just as well served by denying x to everyone. That is clearly not the intention of the principles mentioned above. But if this kind of principle can be included in egalitarianism, then (*pace* Raz) it demonstrates that principles of equality do not have to be expressed in terms of insatiable goods: they do not presuppose what Raz calls 'the consumer's conception of man'.

The fourth form of egalitarian principle is perhaps the hardest for philosophers to take. It states that a certain good should be *more* equally distributed, without in the least committing itself to complete equality. The best example is the principle of greater equality of income - a principle shared by all contemporary egalitarians, although none of them (except, possibly, Carens<sup>16</sup>) believes in strictly equal incomes. What counts as 'more equal' is sometimes a difficult question. But principles of more equality are a standard feature of the egalitarian tradition. Happily, they are also the ultimate testimony to its pluralistic, non-foundational, and mutable character.

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<sup>15</sup> Joseph Raz, 'Principles of Equality' *Mind* 87 (1978) and *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), ch. 9; Douglas Rae et al *Equalities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981).

<sup>16</sup> Joseph Carens *Equality, Moral Incentives, and the Market* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

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