

# JUSTICE, EQUALITY, AND HUMAN WORTH

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## Introduction

The tendency to associate justice and equality to one another is partly due to the fact that people who clamor for social change almost always demand justice and equality alongside freedom. We immediately infer or intuit a connection between them as values belonging to the same category. And yet, of several works that have been written about them, very often the titles simply juxtapose the concepts without implying or suggesting a connection between them. They leave it open whether indeed such a connection exists. There is actually an ongoing debate regarding this. One position is that the two concepts are distinct and can be dealt with independently of each other. Another position is that they actually refer to the same thing and are therefore identical concepts. A third position is that although they are distinct, the concept of justice requires equality.

Aside from the issue of their connection to each other, there are other questions we can raise about them as separate concepts. There is the question whether justice and equality have an intrinsic value or an instrumental one, whether they are ends in themselves or whether they are means to other ends. A parallel question is whether the values have an objective basis or a practical one.

In this paper, I will discuss some of these questions. Although I will cite the ideas of different political philosophers, for the most part, I will rely on the thoughts of Derek Parfit and David Miller. After presenting their views, I will try to show that their ideas rest on the presumption of human worth.

## Justice

The concept of justice has a long history. More than two thousand years ago, early Greek philosophers, notably, Plato (in the *Republic*) and

Aristotle (in the *Nicomachean Ethics*) were already discussing the meaning of justice. After this length of time, no one has said the last word about this concept. From the theoretical point of view, the continuing discourse on justice is a testimony to the claim that in the epistemological prism, truth has inexhaustible reflections. From the practical point of view, there is a reason for the continuing preoccupation with the concept. Despite the abundance of theories of justice, we still have to find a society that comes up to the standard of the philosopher's notion of justice. The failure of philosophy to lead to a just society can be defended by saying that it is not the task of philosophy to produce a society affording everyone a humane existence (if a fully human existence is too much to ask for). But a political philosopher is either anchored on reality or he is dreaming in an ivory tower. In the latter case, Marx is right in saying that philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.<sup>1</sup>

Contrary to Marx's claim, political philosophers are actually reality oriented, and, for many of them, the reason behind all the debates on justice and equality is the need for social change. This explains the tendency to view justice as a means rather than an end itself. Is justice sought for its intrinsic value or is because it improves the condition of those who do not have enough? That people who demand distributive justice are often those who are marginalized or impoverished makes one suspect that the main problem is not unjust distribution but the poverty caused by the unjust distribution. That some have a greater share than others may not be objectionable if the latter have more than enough. That justice is necessary to improve the condition of some people reduces it to a utility, and this utilitarian view of justice is characteristic of the trend of thinking in the greater part of the past century. The view that justice has instrumental value in promoting the greatest happiness of the greater number is rejected by John Rawls whose theory of justice is conceived as an alternative to the utilitarian conception. Following the Kantian tradition, Rawls works on the assumption that man is an end in himself, and therefore, has rights that cannot be sacrificed for the sake of the greatest good for the greatest number. His theory includes a procedure (original position) for arriving at the principles of justice. In the original position two principles of justice are chosen, both of which are connected with equality. More than two thousand years earlier, Aristotle sealed the connection between justice and equality by saying justice consists in treating equals equally and unequals, unequally.<sup>2</sup>



Political philosophers today claim this is only a formal connection because it does not specify the terms of equality between men and the equality of their respective treatment. The theory of Rawls specifies the substance of equality by providing that men must have equal rights to basic liberties, although it does not explain what these liberties are. The first principle of justice provides that each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all. The second principle provides that "... social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged, consistent with the just savings principle and attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity."<sup>3</sup> Does this theory of Rawls imply compatibility between justice and equality? To answer this question, we must begin by asking what this equality means.

## Equality

While the concept of justice goes way back to the Ancient Greek period, the concept of equality as a social value has a relatively recent origin. Prior to the revolutionary period (one of the slogans of the French revolution was "liberty, equality and fraternity"), society was organized without any regard for equality. There was the hierarchy in the feudal system, the division of classes in the caste system, etc. The past century witnessed a shift from a utilitarian conception of justice to the liberal theory of Rawls. In the same way, there was a shift in the emphasis of political philosophy from justice to equality. Long after men have been enlightened enough to reject slavery, apartheid, racial discrimination, etc., the most enlightened group of people, the philosophers cannot make up their minds whether to accept or reject equality. So, there are those who believe that society should be organized according to the principle of equality; they are called egalitarians. There also those who reject this principle; they are called anti-egalitarians. According to Amartya Sen, among other philosophers, this opposition between egalitarians and non-egalitarians is a false one.<sup>4</sup> Everyone believes in some kind of equality. What anti-egalitarians reject is a certain kind of equality. So, several social philosophers are drawn into the "equality of what?" debate. When espousing equality, do we propose equality of wealth, or equality of opportunity, or equality of resources, of welfare, etc.?

One of the problems egalitarians have to deal with is the leveling down objection. In a condition where some have more and others have less, you

obtain equality by leveling down. This means that either you give more to those who have less or you take away from those who have more. In its general form, this might not sound objectionable. But there are cases where the implication or consequence is appalling. In a condition where some are blind and some are not, you level down either by giving sight to the blind or by destroying the sight of those who can see. Vonnegut has an interesting satire about a society organized around the value of equality. Some are talented and some are not; some have more talents and some have less. To obtain equality, those who are talented must bear the ridiculous burden of insuring that they do not use their talents.<sup>5</sup>

### Derek Parfit on Equality and Priority

Parfit distinguishes between two kinds of egalitarianism one of which is connected with justice. Dissatisfied with these two, he proposes the priority view which goes beyond the principle of equality. One kind of egalitarianism is *telic* (short for teleological) while the other is *deontic* (short for deontological). The distinction between the two is based on their reason for rejecting inequality.

Telic egalitarianism rejects inequality because it creates a bad state of affairs. It is a better state of affairs if people are equally better off. This kind of thinking does not rely simply on the principle of equality which provides that it is bad when some people are worse off than others. The principle of equality does say that when everyone is equally badly off, that is worse than where everyone is equally well off. It is the principle of utility which provides that it is better if people are better off, not necessarily equal but better off. Suppose you have a choice to work in either of two companies. In company A, everyone gets equal pay for equal work while in company B workers get unequal pay for equal work. The son of the company's president gets PHP 100,000 a month for exactly the same work you do (with equal output and other things considered), but you only get PHP 50,000 a month. In company A, everyone gets 5,000ph a month for equal work.<sup>6</sup> Judging by the principle of equality, company A is the better place to work in because workers get equal pay. By the principle of utility, company B is better because getting bigger benefits even if unequal is better. A pure egalitarian is concerned only with equality, and it does not matter even if the people are not better off as long as there is equality. The utilitarian is concerned only with utility, and it does not matter even if there is inequality as long as everyone is better off. A pluralist egalitarian is someone who accepts equality as a value but does not think it is the only value. Therefore,



he rejects the idea that it is alright to sink as long as we all sink. Some other values must figure in the calculation of the value equality.

The other kind of egalitarianism is *deontic*, which objects to inequality not because it would create a bad state of affairs but because it is unjust. Deontic egalitarianism appeals to comparative as opposed to non-comparative justice. The former is relational because it entails a comparison of two or more while the latter is not. When an individual does not get what he deserves regardless of whether others get or do not get what they deserve, there is injustice in the non-comparative sense. If some people get what they deserve while others do not, there is injustice in the comparative sense. Deontic egalitarianism rejects inequality because it involves comparative injustice. The latter can be a form of bad for which telic egalitarianism rejects inequality. But what makes it a different form of bad is that it involves wrongdoing. Unlike telic egalitarianism, deontic egalitarianism does not believe that inequality is bad in itself. There is no injustice when nothing can be done about it, when no one is responsible for it. The inequality in the natural distribution of talents is not unjust because it does not involve wrongdoing. For telic egalitarianism, the unequal distribution of talents creates a bad state of affairs and is, therefore, objectionable.

Parfit finds reason for going beyond the two forms of egalitarianism. The weakness of telic egalitarianism is that it is vulnerable to the leveling down objection. Because it considers inequality bad in itself, the only way to obtain equality is to level down the distribution. In a situation where some people have houses while others have none (and when no houses can be built), the only way to level down is destroy the existing houses. Since the telic egalitarian is also a pluralist, ultimately he will have to choose between utility and equality.

While Parfit finds the leveling down objection problematic for telic egalitarianism, he also finds a problem with deontic egalitarianism. Subscribing to the latter entails having to give up some of our beliefs like redistributing some of our resources. Where no one is responsible for the inequality, the issue of justice is irrelevant. It is the dissatisfaction with this thinking that has led Parfit to reject it and to propose the priority view. According to the *prioritarian* principle, benefiting people matters more the worst off people are.<sup>7</sup> This principle is not just saying that it is important to benefit the worst off. All egalitarians would say this because benefiting the worst off somehow lessens the inequality and may close the gap between the better off and the worst off. But the *prioritarian* is not necessarily interested in equality or in reducing inequality. We give priority to the worst

off not because of his relation to the better off. The priority view is not relational or comparative. We benefit the worst off not to raise his level in comparison to the level of the better off but in relation to his own absolute level. To feed the hungry is independent of whether others have more to eat or not. We feed the worst off not because everyone equally needs food for biological survival. Rather, we feed the worst off because a person needs food for survival. Ultimately, therefore, Parfit's priority view does not equalize but it sustains the individual and allows him to reach his absolute level. When Parfit says that this view is universal in scope, he means when anyone anywhere in the world is hungry, he should have food regardless of whether others have more or none. To give him food matters more than it does to give to someone who already has too much to eat. The benefit given to him has more weight than the benefit given to someone better off. Therefore, helping the former takes priority over helping the latter.

### David Miller on Social Equality

First, Miller addresses the question of the relation between justice and equality. The first theory is that the two concepts are separate and have nothing to do with each other.

There may be a formal connection between them, as in the case of justice requiring equal application of rules, but nothing more. The people who subscribe to this idea are anti-egalitarians who believe that justice possesses a value but equality does not. The second theory is that the two concepts are identical, that distributive justice is actually equal distribution or that equality is subsumed under justice. Miller says that if the two were indeed identical, it would not make sense to say I am for justice but I am not for equality. Everyone is for justice but not everyone is for equality. Although philosophers do not agree on what constitutes justice, they are all in favor of it. This is not the same for equality because there are egalitarians and anti-egalitarians. Because you cannot be for and against the same concept in every respect, then, justice and equality cannot be identical. The third view says that the concepts are distinct but are related to each other although it is complicated to define the nature of this relation. It is in this connection that Miller presents his distinction between two kinds of equality. The first kind is distributive and is connected with justice because equal distribution is seen as a requirement of justice. This holds true only under three circumstances. The first is when no one can present a claim to some benefits that have to be distributed. Suppose for one reason or another, a small group or a bigger society is in possession of some benefits.





No one is responsible for bringing it about, and so, no one has a claim to any part of it. Miller says that, in this case, the just distribution requires that it is an equal one. In the second case, particular claims are advanced but there is uncertainty as to the way the claims should be adjudicated. Suppose five people agree to cooperate in baking a cake, and when they are done, they decide to divide it. Because they all participated in baking it, each of them has a claim to a part of it. But no one knows how much share each one is going to get because no one knows who did more work or who was responsible for the way the cake came out. In this case, justice requires that all five of them will get equal shares. The third case is when equal distribution expresses equal membership in a group. The equal right to vote expresses equal citizenship. Justice requires that there should be equal distribution of political rights among citizens as equal members of a society.

The second kind of equality is not distributive in nature. It is not concerned with equal distribution of benefits or advantages. Rather, it specifies a social ideal or a socially-located value that requires men to treat each other as equals. To treat each other as equals negates status distinctions where one is ranked higher than the other. Miller calls this social ideal, social equality or equality of status.<sup>8</sup> It does not require equality in the distribution of social benefits but allows men to be of equal standing despite the inequality of the benefits they enjoy. Some men may be wealthier, more educated, more skilled than the others, but these differences do not figure in the way they regard each other. "They shake hands rather than bow; they choose their friends according to common tastes and interests rather than according to social rank..."<sup>9</sup> This social ideal has become part of our moral consciousness today. This holds true even for anti-egalitarianism because what they reject is not equality itself but strict distributive equality, particularly in the economic sense. That societies today subscribe to this ideal is shown by the change in our attitude towards the act of condescension. Miller says that condescension used to be considered a virtue, but today it is looked upon with derision. Condescension means leaving your position of superiority to go down to the level of those who are inferior to you. This implies a division of society into superiors and inferiors. But under social equality, there is no position of superiority; everyone regards the other as equal. To condescend is presume one's superiority.

Although social equality is not distributive in nature and is not a requirement of justice, it has distributive implications connected with social justice. Upholding this social ideal can influence practices/policies of distributive justice. To promote equal status is to reject any policy or

practice that will produce a ranked society which makes it difficult or impossible to regard the other as equal. To live in a society where one is a millionaire while the other is a beggar, where one has great political power while the other has no voice in political affairs, makes it impossible for them to regard each other as equals. Therefore, social equality is indirectly connected with distributive justice because unjust distribution of benefits makes equality of status impossible to attain.

### Human Worth

The volumes of work written on justice and equality attest to the importance of these two concepts: whether they embody objective value or whether they are socially-located values. But why are they important? What does it matter if you get what is due to you (a matter of noncomparative justice) or you get as much as the other (a matter of comparative, egalitarian justice)? Why do political activists fight and die for justice/equality? Why do statesmen vigorously defend them and make sure they are not trampled upon? Why do political philosophers invest time and energy wrestling with the problem of identifying their meanings and explaining their implications?

Gregory Vlastos argues that equal universal human right presupposes equal, universal human worth.<sup>10</sup> When Rawls says that each person has an equal right to the most extensive system of basic liberties, what is the basis for this right? If one agrees with Vlastos, the answer lies in human worth. But what is it? And on what basis do we claim we have human worth? Our primitive ancestors surely did not recognize it. They were too busy trying to survive that they did not have the time to figure out whether they were human or what it meant to be human, much less to recognize human worth. Is this a human invention to insure commodious, harmonious social life? Is this a developmental social frill, something nice to go with men's development?

Human worth is a supervenient property, and this means that we possess it by virtue of some other property. But what is this other property that determines my human worth? Some answers to this question are metaphysical or transcendental. Man has human worth because he is an end in himself. The religious counterpart of this answer is that men are children of God, and this is enough to explain our worth as persons. There are problems with these answers. Is man an end in himself because of his human worth, or does he have human worth because he is an end in himself? The religious answer is also problematic because not everyone believes in God, and we cannot prove that we are children of God, if such





God exists. The other answers are based on natural capacities like man's rationality or on natural vulnerabilities like man's susceptibility to pain. The problem with natural capacities and vulnerabilities is that they vary in degree from individual to individual. This makes human worth relative to natural capacities and vulnerabilities and makes some people more worthy than the others. This means that those who have more capacities have more human worth. In the absence of a property that defines our human worth, we may have to conclude that the ground for our equality is itself groundless.

Joel Feinberg argues that human worth is not really a property of man but is an expression of an attitude of respect toward a person. We attribute human worth to man as a result of the respect we have for him. But what is the basis of this respect? To explain this, Feinberg cites Bernard Williams' concept of the human point of view. We can look at a person as a good painter or as a lousy musician, and we can have an attitude appropriate for this perception. However, we can also look at a person from the human point of view. Williams gives us an example. If a man spends his life inventing a machine that will not work, we can view him as a failed inventor. But we can also see him from the human point of view and look at him as a man who tried to be a successful inventor.<sup>11</sup> He is a failed inventor but he is also a human being with hopes and shattered dreams.

Every person looks at the world from a certain point of view. He is the center of his subjectivity, of the totality of his experiences, and he views the world from a certain angle. When we look at him from the human point of view, we try to slip into his point of view and see the world as he sees it. We understand what it is like to be him and respect him; we respect his point of view. This respect accounts for his human worth. That I can slip into his point of view and conversely he can slip into my point of view is analogous to Thomas Nagel's metaphysical conception of the Self as one among many. I know how to treat him because he is just another Self like my Self.

In what way does human worth which is a product of our attitude of respect for the other become a ground for the priority view or the equality of status? For Parfit, we must give more weight to the benefit for the worst off, not to reduce inequality but to help the worst off to reach his absolute level. And why is it important to help anyone reach his absolute level? If I slip into his human point of view, I would see how important it is for him to reach his absolute level. In the same way, if he slips into my point of view, *ceteris paribus*, he will see how important it is for me to reach my absolute level. If a person is worst off because he is hungry, we must benefit him by feeding him or by helping him find a way to feed himself,

not because he has to compete with those who have so much to eat but because anyone who is hungry needs to eat. If I slip into his point of view, I will see his world, and I would know what it is like for him to be hungry. If I am homeless, and he slips into my point of view, he would see my world and how I would want to have a home. To benefit the worst off is to slip into his point of view and see his need to overcome his disadvantage. By doing this, we actually create a condition which makes social equality attainable.

Why is social equality important? Because to regard the other as an equal is to recognize that he is a person in his own right, with his own point of view. To regard him as an equal is to signify my respect for him in virtue of which he possesses human worth. And I respect him because I see him from the human point of view. I see him not as a beggar or as a prince but as a human being. I try to slip into his point of view and see the world as he sees it, as a beggar would see it, or as a prince would see it.

The value of social equality rests on the assumption that the other is an equal because he possesses human worth expressing my respect for him and his point of view. All attempts to change society must begin with this—respect for the other—because I see him not as this or that kind of person but as someone with his own point of view, equal to (but not the same as) my point of view. As the song goes, “walk a mile in my shoes... if you can be me and I can be you for just an hour...” I would be able to respect you and you would be able to respect me. Where I fail to see your point of view and not know what it is like to be poor, to be hungry and homeless, I fail to respect you; I fail to recognize your human worth.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," *Writings of Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, ed. Easton and Guddat (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), 402.

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Ostwald (New York: Bobbs Merrill, 1962), 118.

<sup>3</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 302.

<sup>4</sup> Amartya Sen, *Inequality Reexamined* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), ix.

<sup>5</sup> Kurt Vonnegut, "Harrison Bergeron," in *Equality: Selected Readings* ed. Pojman and Westmoreland (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 315.

<sup>6</sup> A modified version of Brian Barry's Example in *The Liberal Theory of Justice* (London Oxford University Press, 1973), 16.

<sup>7</sup> Derek Parfit, "Equality and Priority," in *Ideals of Equality* ed. Andrew Mason (UK: Blackwell, 1998), 12.

<sup>8</sup> David Miller, "Equality and Justice," in *Ideals of Equality*, ed. Andrew Mason (UK: Blackwell, 1998), 23.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>10</sup> Gregory Vlastos, "Justice and Equality," in *Equality: Selected Readings* ed. Pojman and Westmoreland (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 120.

<sup>11</sup> Bernard Williams, "The Idea of Equality," in *Equality: Selected Readings* ed. Pojman and Westmoreland (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 95.