

## ET 2.1 – Introduction to Christian Ethics

### Human Equality

#### Some Reading

- Norman Barry, *Introduction to Modern Political Theory*, 2000, chapter 7
- David Conway, *Classical Liberalism – The Unvanquished Ideal*
- Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue. The Theory and Practice of Equality*, 2000
- John H Elliott, “Jesus was not an Egalitarian. A Critique of an Anachronistic and Idealist Theory”, *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, vol 32, pp.75-91
- Duncan Forrester, *On Human Worth*, 2001
- Michael Jensen, “Equality” in *Kategoria*, 2002, 24, pp.55-61
- Friedrich Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, 1960
- Andrew Heywood, *Political Theory, An Introduction*, 1999, chapter 10
- George Orwell, *Animal Farm*
- John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, rev. ed 1999
- Douglas Rae et al., *Equalities*, 1981
- Herbert Schlossberg, *Idols for Destruction*, 1983, pp.39-87
- Helmut Schoeck, *Envy, A Theory of Social Behaviour*, 1969
- Kurt Vonnegut, "Harrison Bergeron" (short story) - online (or email DF)

Online articles – just search:

- Antony Flew, “Enforced Equality – Or Justice”, 1986, online
- Antony Flew, “Socialism and ‘Social’ Justice”, 1995, online at [http://www.mises.org/journals/jls/11\\_2/11\\_2\\_2.pdf](http://www.mises.org/journals/jls/11_2/11_2_2.pdf)
- Antony Flew, “Locke Versus Rawls on Equality”, 2001, online at <http://www.mises.org/fullarticle.asp?control=810&month=37&title=Locke+Versus+Rawls+on+Equality&id=44>
- Stefan Gosepath, “Equality” in *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, 2001 <http://www.seop.leeds.ac.uk/entries/equality/>
- John Williams, “Equality”, 1992, online at [http://www.acton.org/publicat/randl/92jan\\_feb/williams.html](http://www.acton.org/publicat/randl/92jan_feb/williams.html)
- John Williams, “Equality, Justice and Liberty”, 1984, online at <http://www.libertyhaven.com/theoreticalorphilosophicalissues/libertarianism/equalityliberty.html>

#### A. What do we mean by equal?

- Three things required in order to speak of equality.
- Two things to be compared and a quality in regard to which they are to be compared.
- Two things are equal if they are the same in a certain way.
- Equality in all respects is identity

Equality is a relation between two or more entities.

‘Equality’ (or ‘equal’) signifies correspondence between a group of different objects, persons, processes or circumstances that have the same qualities in at least one respect, but not all respects. (Gosepath)

#### B. Different sorts of sameness

- Dignity-worth-value
- Hair colour
- Bank balance
- Religion
- Exam grades
- Time taken to run 100 metres
- Pay

#### C. Some questions already

1. In what respect?
2. Equality as an assertion or an aspiration? Descriptive or normative? People are or they should be equal?

Are equal:

1776 – US *Declaration of Independence*: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal ...”

1789 – French National Assembly, *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, Article 1: Men are born and remain free and equal in rights ...

1948 - UN *Declaration of Human Rights*, Article 1 – “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and in rights”

Should be equal:

UK Government – has an Equality Minister and funds the Equal Opportunities Commission, the Commission for Racial Equality, and the Disability Rights Commission.

The charity *Scope* describes itself as “For disabled people achieving equality” and is running the *Time to Get Equal* campaign, stating, “We want to build a mass movement of disabled and non-disabled people to create an equal Britain” and asking people to sign the pledge: “I pledge my support to disabled people achieving equality.”

3. If you are asserting equality then on what basis do you assert it and how can you demonstrate it? How do you prove that people are equal?
4. If you are asserting equality in some things then how do you move from that “is” to an “ought” about equality in other things? How do you prove that people should be equal?
5. How do you decide which matters are those in which equality should be secured? How do you distinguish between diversity to be celebrated and inequality to be lamented? Chest hair equality between the sexes? Height equality?
6. How would an evolutionist or a Hindu ground an assertion of the reality or desirability of human equality?

**Hinduism:** “In the ancient *Rigveda* and in many other places in the vast corpus of Hindu religious writings, we find an account of creation in which the various *Varnas* (roughly translatable as castes) emanate from the parts of *Purusha* the primeval man. The Brahmins come from the head or the mouth, and therefore represent rational control; the *Kshatriyas* are warriors – they come from the arms; the *Vaisyas*, or traders, emanate from the belly or the loins; while the *Sudras*, the labourers, come from the feet. And always there are the lowest of the low, the so-called Untouchables, who are below the whole hierarchical ordering of society, suspended between the human and the animal. ... Inequality here is part of the primordial, created and therefore proper state of things.” (Forrester 85)

7. What difficulties might be experienced by an advocate of the reality or desirability of human equality who holds to animal rights, abortion, or euthanasia?

#### **D. Egalitarianism as a salvation project**

- “Egalitarianism” = the belief that people are equal in worth and should be made equal in condition (in some respects)
- “Salvation” = “how the world should be and how we get there” / “a vision for the well-being of human individuals and society and a proposal to bring these about”. Egal-m is a salvation project to the degree that a person believes that inequality is what is wrong with the world and that the world will be well when all people are equal. What is your gospel?
- Some good things which egalitarians are seeking to secure:
  - all people should be respected
  - all people should be treated fairly
  - all people should be cared for
- Questions:
  - where does this vision come from?
  - is it compete?
  - how may it be secured?
- Warning – visions of equality can end in disaster – Genesis 3

## E. Some relevant biblical data:

There is no single chapter of the Bible headed, “what God thinks about equality” but the following sentences summarize some of the relevant Bible truths:

- a) God is infinitely greater than human beings and humans are to recognize this: “Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable.” (Psalm 145.3). No-one is equal with God and this is good!
- b) God is perfectly just – he treats people differently when they are relevantly different: “Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” (Genesis 18.25)
- c) God shows no partiality – he does not treat people differently on the basis on irrelevant differences: “For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe.” (Deuteronomy 10.17). Treat people the same when they are relevantly the same.
- d) God demands similar justice and impartiality from humans: “You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbour.” (Leviticus 19.15). “My brothers, show no partiality ...” (James 2.1-5). “Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God” (Romans 14.10). See also Proverbs 24.23-25.
- e) God gives a variety of gifts to people – not all are the same: “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.” (I Corinthians 12.5-6).
- f) In terms of acceptance with God, all that counts is faith in Christ: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”. (Galatians 3.28)
- g) What makes a human being human is that he is made by God and that God’s glory may be seen in him, God sustains him, God’s demands are upon him, God will judge him. Our relation to God and his regard for us is the most important aspect of our dignity / value / worth. “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness’.” (Genesis 1.26). “And he said to them, ‘Whose likeness and inscription is this?’ They said to him, ‘Caesar’s.’ Jesus said to them, ‘Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s’.” (Mark 12.16-17)
  - “In order to believe in human equality it is necessary to believe in God.” R H Tawney
  - “People are equal in the same way pennies are equal. Some are bright, others are dull; some are worn smooth, others are sharp and fresh. But all are equal in value for each penny bears the image of the sovereign, each person bears the image of the King of Kings.” G.K. Chesterton
- h) These things being true of all other human beings, it follows that they are all to be treated with immense respect and honour. “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein.” (Psalm 24.1) “Show perfect courtesy towards all people” (Titus 3.2). “Honour everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the emperor.” (I Peter 2.17).
- i) Some will receive extra honour (the elderly, parents, the weaker member, etc) and some will receive extra attention and care (the weak, the fatherless and widow etc).
- j) God requires all humans to love other humans as themselves. “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” (Mark 12.31).
- k) In fact, in respect of serving them and looking to their interests, the Lord Jesus Christ shows us to regard others as better than ourselves. “In humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” (Philippians 2.3-4).
- l) Thus, without mentioning, let alone emphasizing “equality”, the Bible teaches and secures all that is good about modern concern for equality without the confusions, contradictions and evils which accompany the modern concern

### **Summary. “With regard to human equality, Christians believe that ...**

1. All humans equally are made by God, are subject and inferior to God, are the property of God and are accountable to God (Genesis 1.1, 26; Psalm 24.1; Psalm 145.3; Ecclesiastes 12.14; Revelation 20.11-15; Mark 12.16-17).
2. All humans should be given respect and honour. (Psalm 24.1; Titus 3.2; I Peter 2.17).

3. Some should be given greater honour than others (those in authority – kings, parents, good elders; the elderly; those who suffer for the gospel; the weaker member).
4. The weak (orphan, widow, non-citizen) should receive especial attention and protection and care.
5. Differences of gifting should be enjoyed and celebrated. (I Corinthians 12.5-6).
6. Justice should be impartially applied (Genesis 18.25; Deuteronomy 10.17; Leviticus 19.15; James 2.1-5; Romans 14.10; Proverbs 24.23-25).
7. We are to love our neighbours as ourselves and look to their interests as to our own. (Mark 12.31; Philippians 2.3-4).

These things secure what is good about the egalitarian's project.

### ***In response to the key questions Christians have coherent answers***

1. Identifying and justifying what's good and right about "equality":
  - How do you know that we are equal in certain ways? – because God who made us says so
  - How do you know that we should treat each other in certain ways? – because God who made us says so
  - How do the two connect? – because we recognise the authority and heed the word of God who made us
2. Securing what's good about "equality – the gospel!

### **F. Some further complications**

1. The "levelling down problem".

Is inequality an intrinsic evil?

If so, then a lower degree of it is a lesser evil ... and there is no reason to acquiesce in any degree of it, however low. If inequality is something wrong in itself then no inequality can be left alone

- Do we object to one very rich man having £5 more than another very rich man?
- The "levelling down objection" ...

Plane crash – well, at least there were no survivors!

It's better that all be blind than that some see and some don't

"The fact is that people are being treated equally if they are treated equally badly. The Mafia hit-man who disposes of his victims with equal efficiency is treating them equally, so is the sadist who tortures any and every person who comes his way with equal cruelty. It seems odd to say that such people are morally superior to a hit-man who occasionally relents or to a sadist who now and then displays compassion and thereby treats his or her fellow human beings "unequally." Treating people "equally" has, in and of itself, no moral merit. Which is better: to treat all people kindly or to treat all people with equal kindness? Surely the former. The latter is satisfied if all people are treated with equally little kindness. The point is simple. The "quantity," so to speak, of treatment meted out to people says nothing whatsoever about the "quality" of such treatment." (from John Williams piece below)

- Is it just a) to assault / enslave all people with equal viciousness? b) to treat the convicted and the acquitted identically?
- Reply: no, justice and equality can conflict
  - and when they do, we must forfeit justice (equality is the higher good)
  - OR and when they do, we must sometimes forfeit equality (justice is the higher good)
- how do we know when? whence our hierarchy of values?
- careful, in this case, not to make equality a form of "justice"

- which inequalities are not injustices at all but diversity to be celebrated? which inequalities are injustices and by what criteria? which inequalities are to be corrected at the expense of justice? and which inequalities are to be tolerated because the injustice of reversing them would be a greater cost than the gain of having them reversed?

## 2. Equality of outcome or equality of process?

- “play by the same rules” OR “receive the same results” (process / outcome)
- you cannot have both – the 100 metre race again
- “From the fact that people are very different it follows that, if we treat them equally, the result must be inequality in their actual position, and that the only way to place them on an equal position would be to treat them differently. Equality before the law and material equality are therefore not only different but are in conflict with each other; and we can achieve either the one or the other, but not both at the same time.” (F.A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, 1960, p.87)
- definitions of liberalism ... Classical Liberalism – equality before the law: “all adults in the the same domain enjoy and exercise the same rights (life, anything in the moral law, property) as each other”. Modern Liberalism – equality of situation: “all enjoy equally as favourable life prospects including comfort, longevity and control over physical assets”

## G. Equality of outcome and compromising justice

James Bovard: “Somewhere in the intellectual fog of the past century, inequality *per se* became associated with injustice.”

1. Justice as a matter of formal equality – treating two equal people equally and treating two unequal people differently.

“When two persons have equal status in at least one normatively relevant respect, they must be treated equally with regard to this respect. This is the generally accepted *formal* equality principle that Aristotle formulated in reference to Plato: “treat like cases as like” (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, V.3. 1131a10-b15; *Politics*, III.9.1280 a8-15, III. 12. 1282b18-23). Of course the crucial question is which respects are normatively relevant and which are not.” (Gosepath)

This is equality before the law: “Justice, in this sense, should be ‘blind’ to all factors other than those relevant to the case before the court, notably the evidence presented.” (Heywood)

Justice – giving to each as he deserves.

So if A and B are the same – both innocent – in regard to speeding – then justice means treating them the same way. It would be unjust to fine A and not to fine B. Why fine A? (Because he is less than 180cm tall – that makes being less than 180cm a crime.)

Having different rules for people who are legally/morally the same is injustice.

2. But equality of outcome in a world in which people are different is only possible by applying different rules. So ... equality of outcome and justice are in tension.

Clearly, unless people are already equal in every relevant respect (in which case there would not be an issue), these two sorts of equality are in conflict. Consider a 100 metre race with just two competitors. One is a healthy, well-trained 25 year old athlete; the other is a 70 year old, 300 pound victim of a recent car accident with two badly broken legs. If we desire equal treatment, the outcome will emphatically be unequal: the 25 year old will cross the finishing line while his rival has progressed only three or four metres. However, if we desire an equal outcome (that the two competitors cross the finishing line at exactly the same moment), unequal treatment will be required: we may allow the 70 year old to start at the 97 metre mark, or we might break the legs of the 25 year old or chain a half-ton weight to his leg. In a world where people are different, equal treatment and equal outcome cannot both be guaranteed.

Generally speaking, egalitarians are more concerned with equal outcome than with equal treatment. They campaign on matters such as wage levels, proportions of employees from particular minority groups and suchlike. But if the people involved are relevantly different, this can only be achieved by unequal treatment. This raises a serious problem: justice is defined as giving people what they deserve. Two murderers should both be punished. If one is punished and the other is not – if they receive unequal treatment – that is unjust. Similarly, if one runner starts at the start-line and the other at the 97 metre mark, then an injustice has been committed.

There is an obvious objection: it is not “fair” that the 70 year old with broken legs should be treated the same way as the 25 year old athlete. But this makes being a fit 25 year old a “crime.” However appealing the rhetoric of *positive* discrimination, *someone* must be discriminated *against*. And to make differences of talent, fitness, intelligence, legitimately acquired wealth, and so on, grounds for “punishment” makes these things crimes, and treats relevantly similar people differently. This is injustice.

3. Social justice. A particular manifestation of this is this way in which the words “social justice” have come to be applied to equalisation of wealth. “Social justice” becomes a shorthand for saying that everyone must have the same amount of money.
  - Redistribution of income to achieve social justice: the (forcible) taking away of the property of individual X to give to individual Y on no other grounds than that X has more than Y
  - But ‘social justice’ is treating the rich and the poor differently on no other grounds than that one is ‘rich’ and the other ‘poor’. This makes it a crime to be rich and a merit to be poor – it is saying that the rich man’s possession of his goods is illegitimate and that they must be confiscated from him and that the poor man has a desert/entitlement to those same goods. But what is the nature of this ‘illegitimacy’ and this ‘desert/entitlement’?
  - This is NOT about whether the rich have a moral responsibility to give to the poor but about whether it is a matter of ‘justice’ that ....

## H. Equality of outcome and compromising liberty

A further difficulty with the egalitarian vision is that it often requires the suppression of liberty. Most fit 25 year olds would object to having their legs broken before a race; a certain amount of coercion will be required to ensure equality of outcome. The same is true regarding taxation. If a rich man is required to pay a higher proportion of his income in tax than a poor man, it may well take the threat of coercion to make this happen.

Thus, the egalitarian vision of equality of outcome involves injustice and coercion. The equality which the egalitarian desires can be achieved only at the expense of justice and liberty. This should come as no surprise: false gospels bring harm not salvation.

The key question of how equality of result / outcome is to be achieved ..

- the 100 metre race. Bank balances.
- voluntary sharing/giving/underperforming OR coercion/compulsion.
- women-only shortlists for MPs; redistribution of wealth
- if by force rather than by choice then equality and liberty are in tension
- “imposed equality of condition leads to the forfeiture of liberty”

“Harrison Bergeron” by Kurt Vonnegut Jr. – see below

A related question is how equality of outcome is to be sustained? If all the money in the world were shared out equally tonight, what happens tomorrow morning?

## J. Then what about equality of opportunity?

... ..

## K. Some ugly roots and fruits of egalitarianism

- related to the specific quest for “equality” we have looked at is a more general attitude / way of looking at things
  1. resentment that someone is better off (richer, more powerful, more popular, more talented) than us
  2. the desire to raise ourselves up or to bring them down
  3. with little regard for the reasons for the differences
  4. the conviction that we are the best judges of these things (*Animal Farm* and political elites)
  5. the rhetoric of compassion for others or commitment to justice (opponents are uncaring; only seeking fairness)
  6. the use of aggression / coercion / theft to achieve our aims
  7. double standards to our own advantage

Envy, injustice, pride, aggression and theft, intolerance, hypocrisy.

Where do we first see all this? In the Garden of Eden.
- Some specific ways in which egalitarianism is manifested
  1. rejection of authority - any sort of hierarchy is resented
  2. obsession with “democracy”
  3. envy of the wealthy
  4. dumbing down – democratization of culture
  5. abandoning the idea and language of educational failure
  6. insistence that anybody can do anything
  7. seeking moral approval of evil under the cloak of claims to equality
  8. victim mindset / “persecuted” minorities / blame culture

## L. A better way ...

### a) think clearly

- remember the key questions ... in what respect? how do you know? how can you prove that? how do you move from “is” to “ought”? additionally ...
  1. Do you think that inequality is itself something wrong and if so, how do you show that there are limits to how far we should pursue equality?
  2. If you want people to receive the same results, how can you avoid injustice?
  3. Do you think that the equality you seeks should be brought about voluntarily or by force?
  4. How do you think that the equalities you seeks to bring about should be sustained given that most of them will not be stable or durable in themselves?

### b) live lovingly

- it’s not enough to see that egalitarianism is confused, contradictory, harmful and often sinfully motivated
- we need to live with the
  - humility before God
  - delight in his ordering of human life
  - submission to his word
  - repentance over our own pride and envy
  - honour towards those in authority

- respect for all other human beings
  - self-giving, loving service of others
  - particular care for the poor and weak
- which are features of true godliness.

**M. “He did not consider equality ... a thing to be exploited ... but took the form of a servant...”**

Those who talk much about equality are simultaneously wanting “salvation” but refusing the Saviour. The only hope for the well-being of human individuals and society is found in the Lord Jesus Christ. His once-for-all redeeming, restoring, renewing work is the only solid foundation. His Spirit-empowered loving servanthood is the perfect pattern ...

1. be like Jesus
2. don't fuss about equality
3. but lovingly serve others in obedience to God
4. and God will make sure you're OK ...

**from Walter E Williams, “Fairness: Results versus Process”, (1998)**

The Chicago Bulls have won the NBA championship six times in the last eight years. There are 20 teams in the league. Is it fair that one team wins so often? By simply knowing the results, can anyone give an unambiguous answer as to whether there's been basketball justice? The answer is no. Chicago's victories might be a result of a collusion between the Bulls players, referees, and timekeepers, or the result of superior ability.

The justice, or fairness, of any outcome can only be meaningfully determined by examining the process that produced it. To determine whether the Bulls' domination of the league is fair or not, one must ask process questions such as: (1) Did the players play according to the rules of the game; that is, did they obey basketball "law"? (2) Did referees apply those rules in an unbiased fashion and were penalties evenly exacted for infractions? (3) Was participation voluntary? If the answers are yes, then any outcome is consistent with basketball fairness and justice.

Suppose we forsake the process approach and take a results-oriented approach. Based on the outcome—the Bulls' disproportionate wins—something should be done to create basketball justice. A Board of Game Deciders could be created to control the distribution of championships. Team owners and coaches might present their cases to the Board. Washington Wizards coach Bernie Bickerstaff might argue that his team has not won the NBA championship in 20 years and is truly deserving of a win in 1999. He might strengthen his argument by pointing out how hard his players worked both during the season and in the off-season. Moreover, Bickerstaff might ask the Board to consider the great psychological damage his players face being seen as perennial losers.

One can well imagine the resulting conflict and rancor that would develop over which team is most deserving of the NBA championship. Decent people would become bitter enemies over who had the more just and persuasive case.

In fact, NBA and other championship games are played every year with little or no bitterness. How is it that people with such conflicting interests play a game, agree with the outcome, and walk away good sports? It is a minor miracle of sorts.

The miracle is that it is far easier to reach agreement about the rules of a game than its outcomes. Even basketball teams in the cellar will conclude that their long-run interests lie in rules that are durable and evenhanded. If a coach yearns for an NBA championship, he can recruit and train superior talent and hire assistant coaches to get the best out of players. On the other hand, if the outcome is to be predetermined, a team owner, instead of trying to raise productivity, will lobby the Board of Game Deciders and bring lawsuits against biased Board decisions. There would be at least two predictable negative results. Predetermined outcomes would lower the skills and fitness of all players and lower the overall quality of the sport. What would team productivity have to do with winning? And, predetermined outcomes would heighten the potential for conflict.

**from John K Williams, “Equality”**

The first point to notice is that "equality" signifies a relation between two or more entities. Were a person to hold up a ball bearing and triumphantly announce, "This is equal!" a listener would be puzzled. "Equal to what?" such a listener would ask. The assertion that an object, in and of itself, is green makes sense; that it is, in and of itself, "equal" makes no sense.

Suppose, in answer to the question, "Equal to what?" our hypothetical speaker pointed to a block of wood and retorted, "Equal to that block of wood." Again, the response would leave listeners bewildered. "In what respect are the ball bearing and the block of wood equal?" they well might ask. "In respect of their weight!" comes the reply. At

long last the speaker's intended meaning is clear. For all the manifest differences between the ball bearing and the block of wood, the weight of each is identical. In respect of their weight, the two objects are interchangeable. If, for some reason, a person wishes to weigh a quantity of sugar equal in weight to the block of wood, it would not matter whether the sugar is weighed against that block of wood or against the ball bearing.

Simply, the word "equality" and its cognates indicate a relationship between some quality or feature, two or more entities, or states of affairs. In respect of this quality or feature, the realities being compared are identical. Two pieces of wood might be equal in length. Three samples of cloth might be equal in color. Four ball bearings might be equal in mass, diameter, and material composition. In terms of whatever quality, property, or characteristic is specified, equal objects are identical and thus interchangeable.

Suppose someone were to assert that "All human beings are equal." Such a person is claiming that in terms of some quality or property or characteristic, all people are identical and thus interchangeable. But what quality, what property, what characteristic? ... ..

The fact is that people are being treated equally if they are treated equally badly. The Mafia hit-man who disposes of his victims with equal efficiency is treating them equally, so is the sadist who tortures any and every person who comes his way with equal cruelty. It seems odd to say that such people are morally inferior to a hit-man who occasionally relents or to a sadist who now and then displays compassion and thereby treats his or her fellow human beings "unequally."

Treating people "equally" has, in and of itself, no moral merit. Which is better: to treat all people kindly or to treat all people with equal kindness? Surely the former. The latter is satisfied if all people are treated with equally little kindness. The point is simple. The "quantity," so to speak, of treatment meted out to people says nothing whatsoever about the "quality" of such treatment.

Actually, devotees of "equality" can never be satisfied. People are objectively speaking "unequal": There is no quality, property, or characteristic—physical, intellectual, or emotional—that all human beings possess to the same degree. Treat unequals equally, and diverse—that is, unequal—outcomes result. Yet, the only way to guarantee equal outcomes for unequal people is to treat them unequally! Either way, raises a complaint. Given equal *treatment*, "unequal outcomes" are castigated as "unfair." Given equal *outcomes*, "unequal treatment" is condemned.

Yet, let us backtrack. Maybe – beyond the physical, intellectual, or emotional – there is some quality, property or characteristic all human beings equally share.

### **from Antony Flew, "Locke versus Rawls on Equality"**

Anyone who wonders how it is that a constitution which was intended to provide for only such a very limited government has come to be interpreted in such a way as to provide one which seems almost unlimited must take account of, among many other things, the enormous influence upon the intellectuals, in the nearly thirty years since it was first published, of John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* – a work which, I was recently told, is widely used in teaching in those law schools from which America's future judges will come.

The first essential step in any critique of *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971) has to be to insist that the title is in a very relevant way misleading. For the first half-dozen pages make it absolutely clear that the book will be concerned exclusively, not with old-fashioned, without-prefix-or-suffix justice, but with *social* justice. It was indeed precisely because so many people had for so long been eager to maintain that their preferred political and social policies would constitute the achievement and/or the maintenance of *social* justice that this book received such an extraordinary welcome on its first appearance, and still continues to be more frequently referred to than any other twentieth-century work of moral and political philosophy.

There is today so much talk of social justice that many may be surprised to learn that the first occurrence of the expression "social justice" known to the revisers of the great *Oxford English Dictionary* is in Chapter V of *Utilitarianism* (1861), where J.S. Mill speaks of the "highest standard of social and distributive justice." This was apparently the first occasion of which anyone writing in English employed the expression "social justice." But the distinction *between* distributive and corrective justice—a distinction which, as far as we know, was first made by Aristotle—was already familiar to the writers of treatises on old-fashioned, without-prefix-and-suffix justice in many other languages.

It is clear that the main reason why many people are eager to describe their favorite policies as productive of a kind of justice is, of course, that this makes those people appear to themselves and to others to be in unchallengeable occupation of the moral high ground. Yet Rawls nowhere does anything to warrant claims that social justice actually is a kind of justice-of justice as traditionally conceived and commended, that is. On the contrary: his own uneasiness—for deterministic reasons—about the applicability of the concepts of just desert and his failure to recognize the possibility of just entitlements which are neither (creditably) deserved nor (discreditably) undeserved leave him with no room at all for the idea of doing justice as traditionally conceived. Indeed, even when writing *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls would appear to have been at least partially aware that he was not in fact presenting an account of justice as traditionally conceived. For he himself there described that work as an account of "justice as fairness." This has led some irreverent but of course very serious critics to construct a possible series of books with

titles of the form *A Theory of X*, in which members would for various values of *X* actually present accounts of that value of *X* as something else.

Most remarkably-and yet, in the circumstances, all too understandably-Rawls himself never offers any definition of the word "justice." He must surely be the first author of a substantial treatise pretending to be about justice not to have done so. Instead, it is only on his 579th page that he explains, without any suggestion of apology, that he was eager "to leave questions of meaning and definition aside and get on with the task of developing a substantive theory [not of 'social' justice but] of justice." A philosopher trained as I was at Oxford in the school of *Litterae Humaniores* cannot fail here to recall the remark made by Plato's Socrates at the very end of *The Republic*: "For if I don't know what justice is, I shall hardly know whether it is a virtue or not or whether its possessor is or is not happy."

The second necessary critical step is to recognize that "in the original position," the hypothetical social contractors of Rawls are "for simplicity . . . required to assume that the chief primary goods *at the disposition of society* are rights and liberties, *income and wealth* (ibid., p. 62; emphasis added). The only reason we are given for making this enormous socialist assumption is the commendably frank but otherwise inadequate admission that "We want to define the original position so that we get the desired solution" (ibid., p.141). This solution, to the surprise of none of our contemporaries, is that "the first principle of justice" is "one requiring an equal distribution" (ibid., pp. 150-51). If, but only if, one was thinking of making a free distribution of *one's own* property among the members of some group of potential beneficiaries, then the initially reasonable but defeasible assumption would indeed be equality.

To make this required assumption is, in effect, to assume that what is customarily called the national income is not, or at any rate ought not to be, what it actually is-namely, the sum of all the incomes of all the individuals and all the firms in the nations-but instead to assume that it is, or at any rate ought to be, the income of that hypostatized collectivity, the nation, or, rather, the state. The phrase "the national income" is thus a prime nonphilosophical member of the class of what Gilbert Ryle famously characterized as "Systematically Misleading Expressions."

Consider, for example, this assumption as it was very clearly made in *An Approach to Social Policy*, an official document of the National Economic and Social Council of the Republic of Ireland, a document drafted for them by D.V. Donison and first published in 1975 by the Stationery Office in Dublin. From it we learn that that the Council is by its terms of reference required to "promote social justice," which for its members apparently involves or simply is "the fair and equitable distribution of the income and wealth of the nation."

This first unargued assumption - that all income and wealth is available for redistribution free of any and all morally valid prior claims to ownership - should have astonished anyone with a knowledge of what philosophers typically said about justice in previous centuries. For it is, surely, historically unprecedented. Hume, for instance, in dealing with justice in the three sections of the part of his *Treatise of Human Nature* which treats "Of justice and injustice," makes no mention of even the theoretical possibility of the collective ownership of all the wealth in a nation. Aristotle, too, in distinguishing distributive from corrective justice in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, most emphatically did not take it for granted that all wealth and income is available, free of all antecedent deserts and entitlements, for distribution or redistribution by the state (1131A 25-29 and 1131 B 28-33).

In defining "the original position so that we get the desired solution" (*A Theory of Justice*, p. 141), the solution desired is that "the first principle of justice" should be "one requiring an equal distribution" (ibid., pp. 150-51). This may well seem an obvious truth to those who have become unthinkingly accustomed to taking the word "equality" and the expression "social justice" to be logically inseparable if not actually equivalent. But before the twentieth century, even those few who believed this principle to be true would scarcely have dared to present it as obvious and incontestable. Certainly Aristotle did assert that ". . . the just is the equal-a view that commends itself to all without proof . . ." But he then went on at once to argue that "if persons are not equal they will not have equal shares." So Aristotle's actual conclusion was not a substantial practical prescription but a purely formal principle. It was not that equal shares for all is the imperative of justice. Rather, it is that the rules of justice, like all rules, require, not that all cases, but only that all relevantly like cases, should be treated alike (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1131A 12-14 and 1131A 23-24).

The third necessary critical step is to recognize a second requirement imposed upon the Rawlsian hypothetical social contractors. The first requirement should certainly have astonished anyone with a knowledge of what in the past philosophers typically said about justice and property. But readers astonished by that first requirement should be even more flabbergasted by the second. For, in explaining "The Main Idea of the Theory," Rawls asserts that "Once we decide to look for a conception of Justice that nullifies the accidents of natural endowment and contingencies of social circumstances in the quest for political and economic advantage, we are led these principles. *They express the result of leaving aside those aspects of the social world that seem arbitrary from a moral point of view*" (*A Theory of Justice*, p. 15; emphasis added).

Certainly, if all possible grounds for any differences in deserts and entitlements are thus to be dismissed as morally irrelevant, then, if anyone is to be allowed truly to deserve or to be entitled to anything at all, it does perhaps become obvious that everyone's deserts and entitlements must be equal. For it is precisely and only upon what individuals severally and individually have become obvious and now are, as the result of their different genetic

endowments and of their different previous experiences and activities, that all their several and often very different present deserts and entitlements cannot but be based.

It is, for instance, only and precisely because one particular individual has justly acquired more property than another that their property rights, their property entitlements, have become unequal. Again it is only and precisely because one individual has committed a crime and another has not that their just deserts necessarily become unequal. It is, therefore, monstrous to dismiss such facts as irrelevant on the grounds that they are "arbitrary from a moral point of view." To seek "a conception of justice" which demands this dismissal is to seek something which is not justice at all. If this is indeed what is required by "social justice," then "social justice" is no more justice than People's Democracy is, or was, democracy.

Given the two requirements which Rawls imposes on his social contractors in the original position, he cannot but refuse to admit the moral validity of any individual property rights, any individual property entitlements. But now, how is Rawls proposing to justify his own insistence on "the priority of liberty," the insistence that "each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others" (ibid., p. 60) and that "each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override" (ibid., p. 3)?

Far be it from me to deny these claims, whatever I might want to say about their foundation. But for Rawls, the insistence on the possession of these inviolable rights constitutes an unwitting admission of the actuality of some most fundamental entitlements which neither are nor could be either (creditably) deserved nor (discreditably) undeserved. And, if he had gone on, as I have done, to explore the kind of justifications for claims to the possession of such rights offered by the Founding Fathers of the American Republic and their contemporaries, then he would have found, as we have seen, that for them these rights to freedoms were essentially connected with property rights to their persons, to their individual talents, and the products of the exercise of those individual talents.

My fundamental objection to the theory construction of Rawls is that it is based upon two monster - not to say monstrous - assumptions. There is first the socialist assumption that "income and wealth" are "at the disposition of society." Then there is, second, the assumption that "the accidents and contingencies of social circumstances" are, "from a moral point of view," irrelevant. These two assumptions are said, no doubt truly, to be necessary in order to produce the desired conclusions. I am myself inclined to say that the first is simply unsupported while the second is simply insupportable. Yet without sufficient support for these two fundamental assumptions, the whole system surely collapses? I am tempted to add, "And good riddance." For the collectivism of Rawls's undertaking to regard the distribution of natural abilities as a collective asset, so that the more fortunate are to benefit *only* in ways that help those who have lost out" (p.179, emphasis and comma added) not only constitutes a most unlovely dog-in-the-manger commitment but also one which is manifestly inconsistent with the initial insistence upon "the priority of liberty." I confess, not very shamefacedly, that had I discovered that my principles required such a commitment, I should have taken that as a pressing reason for reviewing those principles.

## HARRISON BERGERON

*by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.*

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.

Some things about living still weren't quite right, though. April for instance, still drove people crazy by not being springtime. And it was in that clammy month that the H-G men took George and Hazel Bergeron's fourteen-year-old son, Harrison, away.

It was tragic, all right, but George and Hazel couldn't think about it very hard. Hazel had a perfectly average intelligence, which meant she couldn't think about anything except in short bursts. And George, while his intelligence was way above normal, had a little mental handicap radio in his ear. He was required by law to wear it at all times. It was tuned to a government transmitter. Every twenty seconds or so, the transmitter would send out some sharp noise to keep people like George from taking unfair advantage of their brains.

George and Hazel were watching television. There were tears on Hazel's cheeks, but she'd forgotten for the moment what they were about.

On the television screen were ballerinas.

A buzzer sounded in George's head. His thoughts fled in panic, like bandits from a burglar alarm.

"That was a real pretty dance, that dance they just did," said Hazel.

"Huh" said George.

"That dance-it was nice," said Hazel.

"Yup," said George. He tried to think a little about the ballerinas. They weren't really very good-no better than anybody else would have been, anyway. They were burdened with sashweights and bags of birdshot, and their faces were masked, so that no one, seeing a free and graceful gesture or a pretty face, would feel like something the cat drug in. George was toying with the vague notion that maybe dancers shouldn't be handicapped. But he didn't get very far with it before another noise in his ear radio scattered his thoughts.

George winced. So did two out of the eight ballerinas.

Hazel saw him wince. Having no mental handicap herself, she had to ask George what the latest sound had been.

"Sounded like somebody hitting a milk bottle with a ball peen hammer," said George.

"I'd think it would be real interesting, hearing all the different sounds," said Hazel a little envious. "All the things they think up."

"Um," said George.

"Only, if I was Handicapper General, you know what I would do?" said Hazel. Hazel, as a matter of fact, bore a strong resemblance to the Handicapper General, a woman named Diana Moon Glampers. "If I was Diana Moon Glampers," said Hazel, "I'd have chimes on Sunday-just chimes. Kind of in honor of religion."

"I could think, if it was just chimes," said George.

"Well-maybe make 'em real loud," said Hazel. "I think I'd make a good Handicapper General."

"Good as anybody else," said George.

"Who knows better than I do what normal is?" said Hazel.

"Right," said George. He began to think glimmeringly about his abnormal son who was now in jail, about Harrison, but a twenty-one-gun salute in his head stopped that.

"Boy!" said Hazel, "that was a doozy, wasn't it?"

It was such a doozy that George was white and trembling, and tears stood on the rims of his red eyes. Two of the eight ballerinas had collapsed to the studio floor, were holding their temples.

"All of a sudden you look so tired," said Hazel. "Why don't you stretch out on the sofa, so's you can rest your handicap bag on the pillows, honeybunch." She was referring to the forty-seven pounds of birdshot in a canvas bag, which was padlocked around George's neck. "Go on and rest the bag for a little while," she said. "I don't care if you're not equal to me for a while."

George weighed the bag with his hands. "I don't mind it," he said. "I don't notice it any more. It's just a part of me."

"You been so tired lately-kind of wore out," said Hazel. "If there was just some way we could make a little hole in the bottom of the bag, and just take out a few of them lead balls. Just a few."

"Two years in prison and two thousand dollars fine for every ball I took out," said George. "I don't call that a bargain."

"If you could just take a few out when you came home from work," said Hazel. "I mean-you don't compete with anybody around here. You just set around."

"If I tried to get away with it," said George, "then other people'd get away with it-and pretty soon we'd be right back to the dark ages again, with everybody competing against everybody else. You wouldn't like that, would you?"

"I'd hate it," said Hazel.

"There you are," said George. The minute people start cheating on laws, what do you think happens to society?"

If Hazel hadn't been able to come up with an answer to this question, George couldn't have supplied one. A siren was going off in his head.

"Reckon it'd fall all apart," said Hazel.

"What would?" said George blankly.

"Society," said Hazel uncertainly. "Wasn't that what you just said?"

"Who knows?" said George.

The television program was suddenly interrupted for a news bulletin. It wasn't clear at first as to what the bulletin was about, since the announcer, like all announcers, had a serious speech impediment. For about half a minute, and in a state of high excitement, the announcer tried to say, "Ladies and Gentlemen."

He finally gave up, handed the bulletin to a ballerina to read.

"That's all right-" Hazel said of the announcer, "he tried. That's the big thing. He tried to do the best he could with what God gave him. He should get a nice raise for trying so hard."

"Ladies and Gentlemen," said the ballerina, reading the bulletin. She must have been extraordinarily beautiful, because the mask she wore was hideous. And it was easy to see that she was the strongest and most graceful of all the dancers, for her handicap bags were as big as those worn by two-hundred pound men.

And she had to apologize at once for her voice, which was a very unfair voice for a woman to use. Her voice was a warm, luminous, timeless melody. "Excuse me-" she said, and she began again, making her voice absolutely uncompetitive.

"Harrison Bergeron, age fourteen," she said in a grackle squawk, "has just escaped from jail, where he was held on suspicion of plotting to overthrow the government. He is a genius and an athlete, is under-handicapped, and should be regarded as extremely dangerous."

A police photograph of Harrison Bergeron was flashed on the screen-upside down, then sideways, upside down again, then right side up. The picture showed the full length of Harrison against a background calibrated in feet and inches. He was exactly seven feet tall.

The rest of Harrison's appearance was Halloween and hardware. Nobody had ever born heavier handicaps. He had outgrown hindrances faster than the H-G men could think them up. Instead of a little ear radio for a mental handicap, he wore a tremendous pair of earphones, and spectacles with thick wavy lenses. The spectacles were intended to make him not only half blind, but to give him whanging headaches besides.

Scrap metal was hung all over him. Ordinarily, there was a certain symmetry, a military neatness to the handicaps issued to strong people, but Harrison looked like a walking junkyard. In the race of life, Harrison carried three hundred pounds.

And to offset his good looks, the H-G men required that he wear at all times a red rubber ball for a nose, keep his eyebrows shaved off, and cover his even white teeth with black caps at snaggle-tooth random.

"If you see this boy," said the ballerina, "do not - I repeat, do not - try to reason with him."

There was the shriek of a door being torn from its hinges.

Screams and barking cries of consternation came from the television set. The photograph of Harrison Bergeron on the screen jumped again and again, as though dancing to the tune of an earthquake.

George Bergeron correctly identified the earthquake, and well he might have - for many was the time his own home had danced to the same crashing tune. "My God-" said George, "that must be Harrison!"

The realization was blasted from his mind instantly by the sound of an automobile collision in his head.

When George could open his eyes again, the photograph of Harrison was gone. A living, breathing Harrison filled the screen.

Clanking, clownish, and huge, Harrison stood - in the center of the studio. The knob of the uprooted studio door was still in his hand. Ballerinas, technicians, musicians, and announcers cowered on their knees before him, expecting to die.

"I am the Emperor!" cried Harrison. "Do you hear? I am the Emperor! Everybody must do what I say at once!" He stamped his foot and the studio shook.

"Even as I stand here" he bellowed, "crippled, hobbled, sickened - I am a greater ruler than any man who ever lived! Now watch me become what I can become!"

Harrison tore the straps of his handicap harness like wet tissue paper, tore straps guaranteed to support five thousand pounds.

Harrison's scrap-iron handicaps crashed to the floor.

Harrison thrust his thumbs under the bar of the padlock that secured his head harness. The bar snapped like celery. Harrison smashed his headphones and spectacles against the wall.

He flung away his rubber-ball nose, revealed a man that would have awed Thor, the god of thunder.

"I shall now select my Empress!" he said, looking down on the cowering people. "Let the first woman who dares rise to her feet claim her mate and her throne!"

A moment passed, and then a ballerina arose, swaying like a willow.

Harrison plucked the mental handicap from her ear, snapped off her physical handicaps with marvelous delicacy. Last of all he removed her mask.

She was blindingly beautiful.

"Now-" said Harrison, taking her hand, "shall we show the people the meaning of the word dance? Music!" he commanded.

The musicians scrambled back into their chairs, and Harrison stripped them of their handicaps, too. "Play your best," he told them, "and I'll make you barons and dukes and earls."

The music began. It was normal at first-cheap, silly, false. But Harrison snatched two musicians from their chairs, waved them like batons as he sang the music as he wanted it played. He slammed them back into their chairs.

The music began again and was much improved.

Harrison and his Empress merely listened to the music for a while-listened gravely, as though synchronizing their heartbeats with it.

They shifted their weights to their toes.

Harrison placed his big hands on the girls tiny waist, letting her sense the weightlessness that would soon be hers.

And then, in an explosion of joy and grace, into the air they sprang!

Not only were the laws of the land abandoned, but the law of gravity and the laws of motion as well.

They reeled, whirled, swiveled, flounced, capered, gamboled, and spun.

They leaped like deer on the moon.

The studio ceiling was thirty feet high, but each leap brought the dancers nearer to it.

It became their obvious intention to kiss the ceiling. They kissed it.

And then, neutraling gravity with love and pure will, they remained suspended in air inches below the ceiling, and they kissed each other for a long, long time.

It was then that Diana Moon Glampers, the Handicapper General, came into the studio with a double-barreled ten-gauge shotgun. She fired twice, and the Emperor and the Empress were dead before they hit the floor.

Diana Moon Glampers loaded the gun again. She aimed it at the musicians and told them they had ten seconds to get their handicaps back on.

It was then that the Bergerons' television tube burned out.

Hazel turned to comment about the blackout to George. But George had gone out into the kitchen for a can of beer.

George came back in with the beer, paused while a handicap signal shook him up. And then he sat down again. "You been crying" he said to Hazel.

"Yup," she said.

"What about?" he said.

"I forget," she said. "Something real sad on television."

"What was it?" he said.

"It's all kind of mixed up in my mind," said Hazel.

"Forget sad things," said George.

"I always do," said Hazel.

"That's my girl," said George. He winced. There was the sound of a rivetting gun in his head.

"Gee - I could tell that one was a doozy," said Hazel.

"You can say that again," said George.

"Gee-" said Hazel, "I could tell that one was a doozy."

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## Appendix: Sermon Notes on Equality (from Philippians 2.1-11)

### A. Once upon a time ...

1. a reason for things – God’s word
2. the order of things
3. relationship to God - loving, ennobling obedience
4. relationship to creation - loving, servant-like rule
5. respect, justice, care

### B. But then ...

1. deny God’s word
2. invert the order of things
3. grasping equality with God
4. self-interestedly serving the beast
5. rivalry, conceit (empty-glory), selfishness

### C. And so ... the Gospel of Jesus

1. what it is
2. how it works out in real life
  - respect
  - justice
  - care

### D. The Gospel of “equality”

1. how things are and ought to be
2. what’s wrong with the world?
3. how are things put right?

#### Problems:

- on what is the assertion of human equality grounded?
- how do you know in what things there should be equality?
- where do (wrong) inequalities come from?
- how do you deal with them?
  - ungrounded-arbitrary / self-contradictory-inconsistent
  - unrealistic
  - unjust
  - coercive
  - counter-productive

### E. So don’t Christians believe in equality?

1. yes – in some senses

1. All humans equally are made by God, are subject and inferior to God, are the property of God and are accountable to God (Genesis 1.1, 26; Psalm 24.1; Psalm 145.3; Ecclesiastes 12.14; Revelation 20.11-15; Mark 12.16-17).
2. All humans should be given respect and honour. (Psalm 24.1; Titus 3.2; I Peter 2.17).
3. Some should be given greater honour than others (those in authority – kings, parents, good elders; the elderly; those who suffer for the gospel; the weaker member).
4. The weak (orphan, widow, non-citizen) should receive especial attention and protection and care.
5. Differences of gifting should be enjoyed and celebrated. (I Corinthians 12.5-6).
6. Justice should be impartially applied (Genesis 18.25; Deuteronomy 10.17; Leviticus 19.15; James 2.1-5; Romans 14.10; Proverbs 24.23-25).
7. We are to love our neighbours as ourselves and look to their interests as to our own. (Mark 12.31; Philippians 2.3-4).

2. but it's not the real problem
3. and it's not the real solution
4. and worse, it's a distraction
5. and worse still, it's a false gospel

**F. Our attention needs to be on**

- sovereignty of God
- true humanness in Jesus
- service at the heart of life
- justice for all grounded on true righteousness
- love, love, love

**G. And so ...**

1. don't be seduced by the false gospel of "equality"
2. be encouraged at the incoherence and wickedness of it"
3. praise God for the true gospel
4. live out the true gospel in a life of respect, justice, and care
  - in the church as an alternative society
  - in daily life in relation to everyone you meet