

The Problems of Equality
(Tutorial of 14 November 1997)

Economic conditions, both past and present, have seen a common problem throughout time: the problem that some people on the one end of the social spectrum unsuccessfully struggle to obtain the resources in order to survive, while people on the other end of the spectrum have had abundant resources a hundred times that required to survive. The problem stated is that of inequality.

Egalitarian philosophers have invariably regarded inequality as an injustice, either *per se*, or because of its socially problematic outcome, as described above.

In this essay I want to first briefly talk about different aspects of equality, pinpointing their problems in application and the extent to which their achievement actually gives a satisfactory solution to the above problem.

In the second part I want to concentrate on Ronald Dworkin's idea of equality of resources, ie how he reaches his conclusion and what problems are inherent in his argument.

To conclude, I will point out a few alternative viewpoints to egalitarianism, and discuss how they criticise Dworkin's position and how they form a substituting ideal.

Equality of what?

It is needless to say that the notion of equality can take many different guises, amongst them moral equality, political equality, social equality and economic equality.

In discussing equality, we are in effect embarking on a discussion of a theory of justice. To the extent that we regard the abovementioned scenario as a problem, as I imagine most people do, we are assigning the concept of justice, ie it is unjust for such a situation to prevail. As mentioned before, however, we must ask ourselves, if the injustice lies in the *fact itself*, that people live under such unequal conditions, or if the phenomenon of inequality is merely a cause for a different injustice, namely that some people are living in conditions that are unsupportable from a welfare point of view.

I will return to the latter question at the end of the essay, when I discuss Harry Frankfurt's position on the problem of equality, but to begin with I want to concentrate on a topic that I believe lies at the core of both these views of injustice: that of moral equality.

If we consider people living in unsupportable circumstances as an injustice *per se*, we can argue that the injustice lying at the heart of this injustice is the fact that people are having to put up with a form of moral inequality. To put it the other way round: if moral inequality were acceptable, then we might see no reason as to why people should not be left to suffer.

What then, is moral equality? The main assertion of moral equality can be phrased as "Everyone is deserving of respect". Why this should be so, however, is very problematic to answer. John Locke described men as being equal when they are born, in as far as they all

have the characteristics of a 'tabula rasa'. But this doesn't seem to be a satisfactory assertion, since disabilities and natural talents would deny this claim. One is easily led to argue that "everyone is deserving of respect because everyone is morally equal", but this is obviously a circular argument. However, the fact that we are intuitively led to make this circularity points to the fact that the principle *can* only be reduced to itself, ie it is the meta-principle. To put it differently: everyone is morally equal, because everyone is deserving of respect, because. Few people seem to disagree with the assertion in the first place, so I shall leave it as it is.

Even though the notions of political and social equality have many problems attached to them, I shall proceed directly to the discussion of economic equality, since this is the main issue discussed by Dworkin and probably the most complicated notion of its kind.

The definition of economic equality, not merely as a normative, but already as a descriptive concept, seems impossible and throws up a lot of problems. When are two people economically equal? Do they need to have the same income, the same well-being, the same happiness or what?

I want to show how various interpretations of economic equality have their own internal problems and how they lead on to other concepts of economic equality, ending up with Dworkin's case for equal resources.

If two people have equal income, is this enough to assert economic equality? What happens, say, if one person is handicapped and needs more income than the other person, in order to be equally happy? If both have the same income, there is obviously a discrepancy in well-being between the two people.

So is equality of well-being the answer? Assume, that one person has very expensive tastes and requires a hundred grams of caviar each day to be as happy as a person who contents himself with a hundred grams of plain white bread. We may now assert, that if one man gets his caviar and the other his bread, that we have a situation of economic equality from a descriptive point of view, but would we accept this distributional situation from a normative point of view? Doubtfully so. The man contenting himself with the bread would, even though his utility is equal, complain if he saw his neighbour receiving a daily supply of caviar every day in some distributional scheme. The distributional scheme would be said to elicit *envy*, which can be seen as a form of perceived injustice on the part of the person content with bread. Both John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin would describe the caviar person of having *expensive tastes*, which does not justify a redistribution of income.

However, while Rawls asserts that equality of welfare is not undermined by this example, but merely needs to be constrained to avoid such ridiculous outcomes, Dworkin asserts that this, (together with the fact that Rawls' welfare-based system does not satisfactorily deal with the problem of naturally handicapped people) is enough to reject the principle of equality of welfare and has to be substituted with a principle of equality of resources.

Dworkin on the equality of resources

Dworkin makes us imagine a desert island situation, where everybody is endowed with an equal number of clamshells, that act as the island's medium of exchange. Everybody now has the opportunity to exchange their clamshells for a certain bundle of goods, that can be used for consumption or productive means, and can then be re-exchanged for clamshells, that can again be exchanged for further goods etc. etc. In this situation, Dworkin argues, everybody starts out with the same resources and any further outcome is merely the effect of the person's *choices*. If everybody acts rationally, then they will do an exchange according to what gives each person his or her maximum utility, and every subsequent outcome and act of exchange is thus *pareto efficient*, ie nobody is made better off through somebody being made worse off. So, if somebody observes another person's bundle of goods and is dissatisfied with his own bundle and envious of the other person's bundle, he has no right to complain, since he *could* have made the same choices as the other person and thereby received the same bundle of goods.

Dworkin admits that there is, however, in this scenario, a situation whereby people are disadvantaged to begin with, if they receive the same number of clamshells as everybody else. These are people with natural disabilities that require them to have greater resources to begin with. But is it enough to endow these people with a greater amount of clamshells in the initial distribution. Not necessarily: the nature of the person's disability may be such that the disability has an effect on how far they can produce and exchange, so that after a while, they may have had to use up their entire allocation of clamshells.

This is where Dworkin's 'insurance scheme' plays an important part: Dworkin lets us imagine that we are behind a Rawlsian veil of ignorance before the allocation of clamshells: we do not know to what extent we will be perfectly fit or handicapped when we are 'replaced' to the real world. We are now asked how many clamshells we would be willing to forego (every now and again), in order to be insured against the outcome of being naturally handicapped. Dworkin argues that the funds in the insurance should then be sufficient to lead to a fair outcome for those handicapped (or rather, the amount that handicapped people are allocated periodically over and above what they receive through the initial resource allocation and subsequent exchange is then automatically just).

Transferred to the real world, the initial allocation of clamshells would be equivalent to an equal allocation of productive resources to each member of society. One of the reasons why this is not the case in the status quo, is that the mechanisms of bequeaths and inheritances lead to a situation where people are not endowed with equal resources when they are born. To attain a pareto efficient outcome of exchanges, the real world would have to be a system of a free market, in order to allow people to make their choices *themselves*. The notion of the insurance scheme for naturally disabled people would then be a system of taxation and subsidy, as we observe it in today's world.

But is this enough? Will Kymlica points out that it is very difficult to delineate to what extent natural talent, or rather the lack of it, should count as a disability. If some people are endowed with larger natural talent than other people, this may still lead those people with very low natural talent but no obvious natural disability to lead lives that are below a level deemed tolerable. We now seriously have to ask ourselves to what extent Dworkin's principle of equality of resources is valid.

G.A. Cohen points out that one does not have to adopt a principle of equality of resources in order to accommodate justified inequalities arising through people's natural choices, and that one can reasonably adapt the principle of equality of welfare to deal with the problem of people's differing natural choices. Cohen argues that one should adopt a system of *equal access* to advantage, rather than a system of *equal opportunity* for advantage, only the latter of which Dworkin rebukes: "Your opportunities are the same whether you are strong and clever or weak and stupid: if you are weak and stupid, you may not use [these opportunities] well - but that implies that you have them. But shortfalls on the side of personal capacity nevertheless engage egalitarian concern, and they do so because they detract from access to valuable things, even if they do not diminish the opportunity to get them."

This criticism also invokes another, related, flaw in Dworkin's reasoning: for the outcome of his desert-island exchanges to be Pareto efficient, everyone has to act rationally. In the real world, people have differing capacities to act rationally, and some actions are more rational than others, which leads to a situation where a person's envy becomes justifiable nonetheless.

Alternative views on equality

To end, I would like to take up on Harry Frankfurt's view that the injustice does not lie in the fact that people are not equal (economically), but in the fact that some people do not have enough to survive. "With respect to the distribution of economic assets, what *is* important from the point of view of morality is not that everyone should have *the same*, but that each should have *enough*. If everyone had enough, it would be of no moral consequence whether someone had more than others."

The problem with Frankfurt's argument, is that if we compare some of the poorest people in an economy today with some of the richest in a middle-ages economy, we could point out that the poor today are probably better off than the rich in those days, especially in terms of hygiene, food-supply, medication etc. Does this give us legitimate reason to rebuke the claim of today's poor in Britain to receive some form of redistribution? Frankfurt admits that people's requirements adapt as economies evolve, and that today's people have larger legitimate requirements than the people of the middle ages. But if people's requirements are relative to the economic changes over time, why shouldn't they, under the same argument, also be relative to economic changes over a social structure? If rich people change the setup of an economy towards their own good, thus altering the overall characteristics of an economy, why should people not claim to have higher needs in the same direction, thus reinstating some principle of equality?