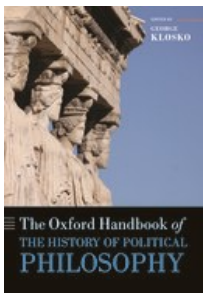

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CHAPTER

36 Equality

Jonathan Wolff

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Abstract

To trace the history of the concept of equality in political philosophy is to explore the answers that have been given to the questions of what equality demands, and whether it is a desirable goal. Considerations of unjust inequality appear in numerous different spheres, such as citizenship, sexual equality, racial equality, and even equality between human beings and members of other species. Ancient Greek political philosophy, despite Aristotle's famous conceptual analysis of equality, is generally hostile towards the idea of social and economic equality. Plato's account of the best and most just form of the state in the *Republic* is a society of very clear social, political, and economic hierarchy. It is with Thomas Hobbes that the idea of equality is put to work. This article explores equality as an issue of distributive justice; equality in the history of political philosophy; equality in contemporary political philosophy; the views of Ronald Dworkin, Karl Marx, and David Hume; equality of welfare; equality, priority, and sufficiency; Amartya Sen's capability theory; and luck egalitarianism.

Keywords: Ronald Dworkin, Karl Marx, David Hume, equality, welfare, Amartya Sen, capability theory, egalitarianism, distributive justice, political philosophy

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Equality in the History of Political Philosophy

MORE than one thinker has seen the development of civilization as the increasing penetration of ideas of equality into ever more spheres of life. John Stuart Mill, for example, seems to have such an idea in mind when he writes:

> The entire history of social improvement has been a series of transitions by which one custom or institution after another, from being a supposed primary necessity of social existence, has passed into the rank of an universally stigmatized injustice and tyranny. So it has been with the

> distinctions of slaves and freemen, nobles and serfs, patricians and plebeians; and so it will be, and in part already is, with the aristocracies of colour, race, and sex. (Mill 1962 [1863]: 320)

To trace the history of the concept of equality in political philosophy is to explore the answers that have been given to the questions of what equality demands, and whether it is a desirable goal. Yet, as we see from Mill's observations, it is a topic that threatens to transform itself into many others. Considerations of unjust inequality appear in numerous different spheres, such as citizenship, sexual equality, racial equality, and even equality between human beings and members of other species, each of which is represented elsewhere in this volume. I will not, therefore, attempt to break down the discussion of equality and inequality into different subsections, but rather will focus on one central question: of equality as an issue of distributive justice, or, to put it more broadly, of equality of fortune.

In all spheres, including the economic, the progress mentioned by Mill took a good deal of time to build up much momentum, both in theory, and, even more so, in practice (for similar observations concerning the
p. 612 broader concept of distributive justice, see ↳ Fleischacke 2004). Ancient Greek political philosophy, despite Aristotle's famous conceptual analysis of equality (Aristotle (1995*b*), is generally hostile towards the idea of social and economic equality. Plato's account of the best and most just form of the state in the *Republic* is a society of very clear social, political, and economic hierarchy (Plato (1955). Aristotle saw no objection to the restriction of citizenship to a narrow class of those who resided within the political community, and, notoriously, argued in defence of slavery (Aristotle (1995*a*). By contrast, Stoic thought, especially in the hands of the Cicero—who regarded himself as an 'outsider'—was more sympathetic to the idea of equality, and Roman law contains the idea that everyone is by nature free and equal, at least in theory. Christian writers, of course, saw human equality as stemming from the premise that we are all created equal in the eyes of god (Hoekstra 2008). However, such views were not translated into demands for political and economic equality, even by major Christian philosophers such as Aquinas or Augustine.

It is with Hobbes that the idea of equality is put to work, albeit in an unusual style and context. In his argument for the absolute sovereign, Hobbes first conceives of human beings existing in a state of nature, where each is free from political, legal, and, arguably, moral constraint. Such a situation, Hobbes argues, would be one of mutual fear, precisely because of natural equality. By this Hobbes appears to mean both the normative claim that no one is naturally subservient to another, but also the factual thesis that no one is so pre-eminent in strength or ability to be invulnerable to others. Equality, therefore, amounts to each person's ability to kill each other person, with co-conspirators if necessary. Such limited adherence to factual equality is also compatible with assuming a great deal of natural inequality in strength, prudence, and intelligence, which Hobbes also stresses throughout his works (Hobbes 1996 [1651]; Hoekstra 2008).

Whether Hobbes's egalitarian starting point leaves any trace on his subsequent account of the organization of the state is less clear. There is, clearly, one highly significant inequality in the Hobbesian state; that between the sovereign and the citizens. Of distribution of wealth between the citizens, though, Hobbes says little, although when enumerating the laws of nature he argues that equity requires equality, and the sharing in common of those things that cannot be divided equally. However, whether Hobbes felt that these laws of natures had implications for the laws of property is less clear. It is likely that Hobbes's denial of natural inequality, and advocacy of natural equality, was intended to provide a background to the thesis that social and material inequality in civil society exists on the licence of the sovereign, and not that such inequality violates natural law (Hobbes 1996 [1651]).

Equality is more obviously part of Locke's explicit project. At pains to refute the feudal conception of the divine right of kings, Locke argues, on the grounds of both biblical interpretation and natural reason, that human beings are born 'free and equal', with natural rights to life, liberty, and estate. The right to estate, however, in itself has few distributive implications. Locke, famously, provided a 'labour-mixing' argument for the justification of private property, in which the first person to mix his or her labour with land or any

p. 613 other natural resource, previously held in common, becomes ↳ entitled to that land, subject, first, to the 'non-spoilage' proviso that what is taken must not be allowed to spoil, and, second, the 'sufficiency' proviso, which asserts that one person's appropriation is justified only on the proviso that 'enough and as good' is left for others. Although there is some interpretative controversy, the standard interpretation is that Locke intends this latter proviso to set out a necessary condition for justified property acquisition, and hence those appropriating property must, at a minimum, leave those without property in no worse state than they would have been had there been no individual ownership (Locke 1988 [1690]; for discussion, see Waldron 1980). This provides an assurance of some sort of social minimum, at least for those able to work. A further passage, from Locke's *First Treatise* (sect. 42), states that 'God has given no one of his children such a property... but that he has given his needy brother a right to the surplusage of his goods...when his pressing wants call for it' (Locke 1988 [1690]: 170). This is often regarded as also providing some sort of social minimum, but, like the reasoning based on the sufficiency proviso, falls far short of any concern for significant material equality. Like Hobbes, Locke seeks to undermine the case for any form of natural social or economic hierarchy, but such opposition is quite consistent with accepting inequality based on human convention.

With Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a concern for material and social equality becomes much more embedded into an overall view of the nature of a desirable political community. In the *Discourse on Inequality*, Rousseau, in somewhat exaggerated style, attributes many of the problems of civilization to the institution of property and subsequent inequality. 'The first man who, having enclosed a piece of land, thought of saying, *This is mine*, and found people simple enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society. How many crimes, wars, murders, miseries, and horrors might mankind have been spared, if someone had pulled up the stakes or filled in the ditch, and shouted to his fellow-men: "Beware of listening to this imposter; you are ruined if you forget that the fruits of the earth are everyone's and that the soil itself is no one's" ' (Rousseau 1958*a* [1754]: 84).

In *The Social Contract* Rousseau connects economic equality to the conditions of political stability, arguing that, for a society to be governed by the general will, no citizen should be rich enough to buy another, and no citizen so poor as to be obliged to sell himself. It is tempting, therefore, to assume that Rousseau's opposition to material inequality was largely instrumental, in that material inequality would undermine political equality. While this instrumental defence is certainly part of his view, Rousseau appears also to oppose material inequality itself, as an unattractive aspect of contemporary society (Rousseau 1958*b* [1762]).

It would be wrong, though, to present the philosophical tradition as becoming increasingly favourable to ideas of equality in any linear fashion. Hume, in *his Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, argued that equality is, 'extremely PERNICIOUS to human society'. Hume argues:

> Render possessions ever so equal, men's different degrees of art, care, and industry will immediately break that equality. Or if you check these virtues, you reduce society to the most
> p. 614 extreme indigence; and instead of preventing want and beggary ↳ in a few, render it unavoidable to the whole community. The most rigorous inquisition too is requisite to watch every inequality on its first appearance; and the most severe jurisdiction, to punish and redress it. (Hume 1975 [1751]: 194)

In this single passage Hume makes three trenchant arguments against equality: first, it is unsustainable; second, it leads to extreme economic inefficiency; and, third, it requires tyranny if it is to be enforced. Such arguments remain of great importance in the contemporary debate, and anticipate some of the arguments of Robert Nozick (1974), as we shall see later in this chapter.

Hume's opposition to equality did not settle the debate, but it may have encouraged a more complex analysis. John Stuart Mill, for example, expressed a type of double-mindedness about equality. On the one hand, he believed that a 'levelling' of property—sharing it equally among all—would be a disaster for society, leading to a loss of initiative, incentives, and productivity, to the disadvantage of all, including those who at present hold no property. So concerned was he about this prospect that, in *On Representative Government*, he notoriously proposed that democratic voting procedures should be skewed to give the propertied or the educated 'plural votes' to avoid the prospect that the poor, who were the numerical majority, would gain power and attempt to introduce levelling schemes (Mill 1993). On the other hand, in *Principles of Political Economy and Chapters on Socialism*, he seemed to regard it as inevitable that, as long as human beings continued to progress, eventually the division between capitalist and worker would be overcome, and production would be undertaken by associations of workers, collectively owning the capital they used for production (Mill 2008).

Hence, despite their differences, there is a certain common ground between the hopes for the future of Mill and Karl Marx. Both were inspired by French Socialism to look forward to a society in which 'the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all' (Marx 2000; Marx and Engels 2000 [1848]; Mill 2008), and that class-based society and exploitation would be transcended. Of course, their analysis of how such a society might be achieved, and their understanding of their own role in that process, differed considerably. Unlike Marx, Mill did not advocate revolution, or see himself as the intellectual collaborator with a mass movement. Neither thinker, however, offered much in detail about how such a society would be organized, as both viewed future society not as the realization of an idea, as Marx puts it, but the result of a historical process, which could not be anticipated in its full form. Another way of putting this point is that, while the 'Utopian Socialists' such as Owen, Saint-Simon, and Fourier, put forward detailed ideas of a just society, to which reality must be made to conform (see Kolakowski 1981), Marx and Mill gave priority to the process of history, which, they both predicted, would generate some form of socialist organization. Equality, for both, was not so much a matter of equal division of some resources (although many existing inequalities would be reduced) but rather the ending of social classes based on differential ownership of the means of production and exploitation. Indeed, Marx argued that taking the
p. 615 idea of equality literally is ↳ self-defeating, for, he claimed, rendering different individuals equal in one respect will make them unequal in some other respect. Marx's own view of a society of equals was one in which each contributed according to ability, and received according to need (Marx 2000).

Equality in Contemporary Political Philosophy

The central point of reference for the debate about equality in contemporary political philosophy is, of course, John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, first published in 1971, and somewhat revised in 1999, with important further contributions from Ronald Dworkin (1981*a*, *b*, 2000), and Amartya Sen (1980, 1992, 1997).[1] Rawls offers a complex theory, which he summarizes in the following terms:

1. 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.

2. Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are:

   (a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged...and

   (b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity. (Rawls 1971: 302; 1999: 266)

For present purposes we should concentrate on only the first half of Rawls's second principle, known as the Difference Principle, as it is this that is the primary focus for the topic of economic distribution. Criticisms of Rawls's Difference Principle come from many directions. Shortly after the publication of a *Theory of Justice*, Robert Nozick published *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, offering a strikingly different 'libertarian' approach to political philosophy, in which the government is restricted to the role of a 'minimal state' to protect person and property, and has no right to engage in redistribution from one person to another, except to rectify theft or fraud. The attempt to achieve equality is, on this view, a violation of property rights, and also an infringement of individual liberty (Nozick 1974).

Rawls was also criticized by thinkers more sympathetic to the idea of equality, such as Dworkin, who can be read as raising two central challenges (Dworkin 1981*b*; see also Kymlicka 2002). The first develops Nozick's objections, and can be put like this: Rawls's Difference Principle seems to be indifferent to the question of why it might be that someone is among the worst off. Some people may be badly off because they are unable to work, or unable to find work. But others may unemployed simply through choice. Are they equally deserving or entitled to benefit from the work of others? Can it be fair to tax those who work in order to
p. 616 benefit others who have the same opportunities, but ↳ from their own free will choose not to make use of them? The Difference Principle, however, does not require answers to these questions, apparently redistributing goods to the worst off, whatever the reason for their ill fortune. In Dworkin's view this is contrary to equality. Equality should, other things being equal, allow those who work hard to reap the rewards, while those who chose to do less should bear the consequences of their choices, if they are freely made.

Dworkin's second objection, also made by Sen, raises a new difficulty. The Difference Principle distributes material resources, identifying the worst off as those who have the least income and wealth. However, some people have much more expensive needs than others. In particular, people who are severely disabled, or have expensive medical requirements, may find themselves unable to pay the expenses needed to achieve a reasonable level of well-being, even if their income does not put them among the worst off.

The natural response to the problem of expensive needs, such as those of disabled people, would be to move to a more subjective index of well-being, such as happiness or preference satisfaction. However, Dworkin argues that this would be a mistake. First he unleashes a battery of objections against the coherence of a welfare measure—essentially the difficulty of determining when two different people are at the same level, which, of course, is central to any theory of equality. But the argument that is most distinctive and has had the greatest impact is the problem of expensive tastes. Imagine two people who have the same ordinary tastes, talents, and resources, and the same ability to convert resources into welfare. Now one of them—Louis—decides that he wants to change his tastes, and manages to develop a taste for pre-phylloxera claret and plovers' eggs, and is consequently unsatisfied with beer and hens' eggs, therefore needing more money to achieve a comparable level of welfare to others. According to Dworkin, the theory of equality of welfare would require a transfer of resources from the person with ordinary tastes to the person with newly developed expensive tastes, in order to equalize their welfare. This, he plausibly argues, is deeply counter-intuitive (Dworkin 1981*a*).

Dworkin argues that the difficulties with expensive tastes can be avoided by his theory of equality of resources, rather than equality of welfare. What matters, on such a view, is the share of resources people have, rather than how happy or satisfied those resources make them. And the distinct problem of subsidizing those who choose not to work can be avoided by incorporating a notion of responsibility within the theory of equality. It is possible to make people responsible for matters within some domains, but not within others. Dworkin, therefore, makes a distinction between one's ambitions—including the realm of the voluntary choices one makes—and endowments, which we can think of as including in-born talents, genetic predispositions, and so on. Dworkin's theory is that, while equality requires compensation for the bad 'brute luck' of being born with poor endowments, or unforeseeable poor luck in other aspects of life, it

does not require compensation for poor ‘option luck’, which typically includes the results of freely made choices.

p. 617 There remains, however, the question of how to determine the appropriate level of compensation or subsidy. Dworkin makes the brilliant observation that insurance is a device for converting brute luck into option luck. It may be a matter of pure chance whether lightning strikes my house. But, if an easily available insurance policy would protect me from loss, chance is now reduced to choice. Dworkin's argument is that, if, against a background of equality, insurance is available against a hazard, and a person decides not to insure, then the appropriate level of compensation can be settled through insurance, and there is no case in justice for subsidizing the uninsured by taxing others who beforehand were no better off.

However, it is not possible to obtain insurance against all bad brute luck, for we are affected from the moment we are born. Some people are born with low talents, or, as already discussed, with disabilities. But insurance against bad brute luck that has already happened is not available. Nevertheless, as Dworkin argues, it is possible to imagine what insurance one would take out, hypothetically, behind a veil of ignorance in which you knew the prevalence of, and disadvantage caused by, different types of disability, but did not know whether or not you personally were affected. Knowing this information should allow one to decide whether to insure, and if so at what level. Averaging the decisions gives a standard hypothetical premium and payout, and these can be used to model a just tax and transfer scheme. A similar move is available to model appropriate welfare payments for those of low talent. Dworkin thus provides a theory of equality that has many attractive features (Dworkin 1981*b*). However, not all contemporary theorists of equality see the issues in the same terms.

Unconditional Basic Income

Before looking at direct responses to Dworkin, it is worth looking at a group of theories, according to which, contrary to Dworkin, each person is entitled to a payment from the state in addition to anything (or nothing) he or she may earn from other sources. This is the theory of ‘unconditional basic income’, which has been defended in various ways. For example, it has been argued that, if some prefer to work and some prefer not to, then neutrality between conceptions of the good requires us not to punish those who decide not to work (Van Parijs 1995; Levine 1998). It can also be argued that unconditional basic income would have various consequential advantages, such as ending discrimination against part-time workers, and requiring work with poor conditions to be paid a decent wage (Van Parijs and van der Veen 1986).

An alternative defence starts from the assumption that all human beings are joint owners of the earth and its resources. To simplify, we can imagine each of us as the owner of one share in ‘Earth PLC’. Those using any of the world's resources must pay a rent, which is returned to the shareholders as a dividend. Accordingly, anyone who uses more than a per capita share of the world's resources owes more rent than he
p. 618 or she will get back in dividend; those who use less will get more dividend than they must ↳ pay in rent. This, of course, yields a payment for everyone, however they act, although, of course, some will pay more in rent than they receive back in dividend (Steiner 1994). The theory of basic income, however defended, is, of course, highly controversial, at least in part because it (deliberately) has a limited place for individual responsibility.

Equality of Welfare Reassessed

Dworkin, as we saw, considers and rejects equality of welfare as a possible response to the problem presented by the fact that disabled people may need more resources than others to achieve an acceptable standard of living. His argument is based on the example of Louis's expensive tastes. Richard Arneson, however, suggests that this argument is ineffective. Louis deliberately cultivated his expensive tastes. He could have achieved the same level of welfare as other people by remaining content with hens' eggs and beer, but he chose otherwise. Arneson points out that Dworkin's distinction between theories of resources and theories of welfare cross-cuts with another, between what we could call 'outcome' and 'opportunity' theories. It is true, Arneson, accepts, that equality of welfare outcomes would require subsidizing Louis's deliberately cultivated expensive tastes. However, Louis does have equality of *opportunity* for welfare, but he squanders it by deliberately cultivating expensive tastes. If he was born with expensive tastes, then the case for subsidy is more compelling, for he would then lack equality of opportunity for welfare. Hence, Arneson argues, Dworkin has drawn the wrong conclusion from his example. In effect, Arneson suggests, Dworkin has compared equality of welfare *outcomes* with equality of *opportunity* for resources. The expensive-tastes argument shows that equality of welfare outcomes is unacceptable, but this is a reason for moving to an opportunity conception, not a resources conception (Arneson 1989).

G. A. Cohen argues in a similar way, although, unlike Arneson, he claims that an adequate theory of equality must use what he called the 'currency' of 'advantage' that incorporates both welfare and resources. Cohen endorses one of Dworkin's arguments against pure welfarism; that it would have the bizarre consequence that it would require transfers from the very cheerful poor—such as Dickens's Tiny Tim—to the wealthy but miserable—such as Scrooge. But equally, Cohen argues, it would be wrong to follow Dworkin and endorse a pure resource-based metric in which people were not compensated for pain and suffering (Cohen 1989). These issues continue to be debated (see the papers in Burley 2004).

Equality, Priority, and Sufficiency

A different line of criticism of the theory of equality focuses on the question of whether equality is of value
p. 619 in itself. A traditional argument against equality is that it requires ↳ levelling down: that, if there is a choice between equality at a lower level and inequality at a higher level, then equality is required, even if it makes literally every individual worse off. Although familiar, few egalitarians took this argument seriously, brushing it aside one way or another, until Rawls presented the difference principle, in which inequalities are tolerated when they are to the advantage of the worst off (Rawls 1971, rev. 1999). This is intended to prevent levelling down.

It is not always clear, however, whether Rawls should be treated as a defender or critic of equality, as his theory does permit inequality (Daniels 1975; Nagel 1979). The situation, however, has been clarified by work by Harry Frankfurt and by Derek Parfit, which generates distinctions between a range of theories of different strength and commitment. First, Frankfurt argues that egalitarians are not, or at least should not, be concerned with equality as such, but with whether individuals are leading sufficiently good lives, where 'sufficiency' is to be understood non-comparatively. What matters, argues Frankfurt, is whether people have enough to live a good life. Comparisons with others are alienating, and deflect oneself from the value of one's own life (Frankfurt 1987). Whatever we think of the claims of the alienating nature of comparisons, it cannot be denied that there is a certain attraction to such a sufficiency view, as distinct from equality.

However, there are further options. Parfit describes a Rawlsian-style view as one of 'priority to the worst off', which again is distinct from equality. Indeed, this view comes in various strengths. Rawls's own view is one of absolute priority, where the claims of the worst off must always be given priority. Parfit's view is one of a form of 'weighted priority', in which the claims of the worst off have greater weight than then claims of

others, but can, at least in theory, be outweighed. On this view there is such a thing as ‘asking too much’, even if you are the worst off in society (Parfit 1998).

Sen and Capability Theory

In parallel to Dworkin, Amartya Sen also developed an alternative to Rawls. Sen was particularly exercised by Rawls's index of well-being in terms of primary goods, and by the fact that this ignored the plight of people with unusual or extensive needs. Sen's suggestion is that evaluation of how well an individual's life is going, from the point of view of whether he should be offered state support, should measure neither the resources someone has, nor the welfare he is able to derive, but his ‘capability to function’. A functioning is what a person can ‘do or be’: achieve nourishment, health, a decent life span, self-respect, and so on. A person's ‘capability set’ is the alternative sets of functionings he is able to achieve with his resources and opportunities, and a capability, therefore, is the freedom to achieve a functioning.

This pluralist view of well-being is often regarded as a more realistic account than any theory of welfare or resources. It also contains within it a particular theory of responsibility. If one has the capability to achieve
p. 620 functionings, but neglects to do so, ↳ then one is responsible for one's own situation and does not have a claim in justice against others for help. This notion of freedom and responsibility, within a theory of equality, has made the theory attractive to many.

Sen's theory has become extremely important in development economics, influencing policy within organizations such as United Nations, encouraging a move away from income measures of poverty, to ‘lack of basic functioning’ (United Nations 2005). This has been among the contributions that won him the Nobel Prize in Economics in 1998. However, political philosophy has found it harder to incorporate Sen's theory, for two main reasons. First, Sen has always refrained from setting out a definitive list of human functionings. Second, on a pluralist view, it is very hard to understand what equality means. Equality seems to require a way of measuring functionings against each other, but the essence of a pluralist view is that this is not, in general, possible. Solving the first problem, as Martha Nussbaum has attempted to do in laying out an account of essential human functionings, simply brings out the difficulty of the second (Sen 1980, 1992, 1997; Nussbaum 2000).

Nevertheless, the contributions of Frankfurt and Parfit have allowed political philosophers to make better use of Sen's approach, in that a ‘sufficiency view’ of capabilities has appeared a more promising approach (Anderson 1999; Nussbaum 2006), in which the goal of social policy is to bring each person to a threshold level of sufficiency in each capability. There are, however, severe difficulties when resource constraints make this impossible. The theory will need to be supplemented in some way to deal with priority setting between competing claims, and many of the initial difficulties reassert themselves. However, the position may not be completely hopeless, and it has been argued that it is possible to combine a prioritarian position with a (modified) capability view (Wolff and de-Shalit 2007).

‘A Society of Equals’ and the Critique of Luck Egalitarianism

The distinctive innovation of the theories of Dworkin, Cohen, and Arneson is to combine individual responsibility with a concern for equality, by making a distinction between those aspects of one's life and fortune for which one is responsible and those for which one is not. Together, in a phrase coined by Anderson (1999), those theories are collectively referred to as ‘luck egalitarianism’, as their goal is to ‘neutralize’ the effects of luck on individual lives.

It may be, however, that attempting to make this distinction appears to have a number of unfortunate effects. For example, it will have to split claimants into those who are responsible for their plight and those

who are not, which in some circumstances can be humiliating even for those who are entitled to help, who, for example, might have to argue that they are untalented in order to qualify for state support (Wolff 1998). Furthermore, many of the policies strictly entailed by the theory seem deeply inhumane. For example, those
p. 621 who have become disabled through 'bad option luck' are ↳ responsible for their own disability, on the luck egalitarian view, and strictly should not be entitled to any state help. In response, Anderson suggests that the 'negative aim' of egalitarianism should not be to eliminate the effects of bad luck, but to end oppression, domination, and exploitation. An equal society is not one that has eliminated the effects of luck, but one that has achieved relations of equality between individuals (Anderson 1999). Such a view has also been defended in recent writing by Samuel Scheffler (2003).

This move towards 'relational' or 'social' equality picks up a concern running from an older tradition in thinking of equality, exemplified in the works of such thinkers as R. H. Tawney (1931), and carried forward by Bernard Williams (1962), Michael Walzer (1983), Richard Norman (1998), and David Miller (1999). The central idea is that a society of equals has to create conditions of mutual respect and self-respect and thereby overcome hierarchical divisions. This type of view has strong affinities with the feminist theorists Iris Marion Young (1990) and Nancy Fraser (Fraser and Honneth 1998). There are numerous variation on this theme, but the core idea in an equal society is one in which people relate to each other in certain ways, rather than one that distributes resources, well-being, or capabilities equally. Of course, distribution will also be important, but its importance is secondary or derivative, on such a view.

Equality in Practice

In recent years there has been increasing attention to the topic of the relation between theory and practice. Much work in political philosophy is based on 'ideal theory' or 'full compliance'. That is, its aim is to set out a theory for the just society, without raising questions of how, historically, such a society could be achieved, and assuming that all citizens will follow the rules. However, there is a lurking question about the application of such theories to the real world. It may be impossible to implement a theory for many reasons: that it makes unreasonable demands of human beings; that it is not fully coherent; that there is no political will; that there is no route from where we are to where we would be, and so on. For this reason some theorists are beginning to think that philosophers should pay greater attention to the question of how to improve the actual world, rather than try to design principles for a world we may never see (Barry 2005; Wolff and de-Shalit 2007).

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Notes

1 Much of the material in this section draws on Wolff (2007).