

# Introduction to Politics

Equality

# Equality

## Meaning and Interpretation

- Equality is a highly complex concept, there being as many forms of equality as there are ways of comparing the conditions of human existence. For instance, it is possible to talk about moral equality, legal equality, political equality, social equality, sexual equality, racial equality and so forth.
- The goal of egalitarians is to establish the legal, political or social conditions in which people will be able to enjoy equally worthwhile and satisfying lives.
- Equality, in other words, is not about blanket uniformity, but rather is about ‘levelling’ those conditions of social existence which are thought to be crucial to human well-being.

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## Formal Equality

The most obvious, and perhaps most important, manifestation of formal equality is the principle of legal equality, or 'equality before the law'. This holds that the law should treat each person as an individual, showing no regard to their social background, religion, race, colour, gender and so forth. Justice, in this sense, should be 'blind' to all factors other than those relevant to the case before the court, notably the evidence presented.

Formal equality implies that, by virtue of their common humanity, each person is entitled to be treated equally by the rules of social practice. As such, it is a procedural rule which grants each person equal freedom to act however they may choose and to make of their lives whatever they are capable of doing, without regard to the opportunities, resources or wealth they start with.

The principle of formal equality is, however, essentially negative: it is very largely confined to the task of eradicating special privileges.

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## Equality of Opportunity

Formal equality pays attention to the status people enjoy either as human beings or in the eyes of the law; it does not address their ‘opportunities’, the circumstances in which they live and the chances or prospects available to them. Equality of opportunity is concerned principally with initial conditions, with the starting point of life.

In effect, the principle of equal opportunities comes down to ‘an equal opportunity to become unequal’. This is because the concept distinguishes between two forms of equality, one acceptable, the other unacceptable. Natural inequality, arising from personal talents, skills, hard work and so on, is considered to be either inevitable or morally ‘right’; in Margaret Thatcher’s words there is a ‘right to be unequal’. However, inequalities that are bred by social circumstances, such as poverty, homelessness or unemployment, are morally ‘wrong’, because they allow some to start the race of life halfway down the running track while other competitors may not even have arrived at the stadium.

Equal opportunities means, put simply, the removal of obstacles that stand in the way of personal development and self-realization, a right that should surely be enjoyed by all citizens. The principle of equal opportunities leads to reverse or ‘positive’ discrimination.



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## Equality of Outcome

Whereas equal opportunities requires that significant steps are taken towards achieving greater social and economic equality, far more dramatic changes are necessary if ‘outcomes’ are to be equalised.

This is a goal which uncovers a fundamental ideological divide. Socialists, communists and some anarchists regard a high level of social equality as a fundamental goal, while conservatives and liberals believe it to be immoral or unnatural.

A concern with ‘outcomes’ rather than ‘opportunities’ shifts attention away from the starting point of life to its end results, from chances to rewards.

Critics, however, point out that the pursuit of equality of outcome leads to stagnation, injustice and, ultimately, tyranny. They argue that the drive for equality of outcome is carried out at the expense of individual liberty. Also, as Aristotle argued, injustice arises not only when equals are treated unequally, but also when unequals are treated equally.

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## Equality of what?

**Equality of Welfare-** According to the classical utilitarian thinking, as espoused by **Jeremy Bentham**, welfare refers to the happiness which is understood as the net balance of pleasure over pain that the individual experiences. A society that believes in distributing welfare equally will not worry much about how much resources individuals get, but whether or not these resources are instrumental in securing for each individual a level of satisfaction or happiness equal to everyone else. Under such a scheme, it is imperative that we fulfil everyone's welfare equally irrespective of the inequality entailed in the distribution of resources.

**Equality of Resource-** This view of equality or **'resource egalitarianism'** is most expressly identified with the views of John Rawls, Ronald Dworkin and Eric Rakowski. Equality of resources holds that a distributional scheme treats people as equals 'when it distributes or transfers the resources.

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## Equality of what?

**Equality of Capabilities-** The economist Amartya Sen pioneers the idea that distributional equality should concern itself with equalizing people's capabilities, instead of emphasizing on resources or incomes.

Sen proposes the notion of well-being understood in terms of *function*. Reading is a function vital to leading a valuable life. However, Sen does not argue that social policy should be concerned with function. Social policy, according to Sen, should instead focus on *capabilities*. A capability is the ability to achieve a certain sort of function. For example, literacy is a capability, while reading is a function.

In a society where people are illiterate, a state should actively promote people's ability to read, i.e. literacy. Whereas a resource egalitarian may insist that resources such as books and educational services may be provided for in regions that are deficient in literacy, the capability advocate would argue that more than a provision of external means what matters is the capability—an internal ability—of the target population to read and write.