



# IDEA OF EQUALITY : SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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Many Christians proclaim all men “equal in the eyes of God.” The United States was founded on the principle of “equality of rights.” The basis of modern Western jurisprudence is “equality before the law.” The rallying cry of the French Revolution was “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.” A central goal of communism and socialism is “economic equality.” The American Civil Rights Movement seeks “equality of opportunity.” And the modern women’s movement champions “equal rights for women” and “equal pay for equal work.”

While the meaning and compatibility of this multitude of “equalities” is far from clear, it is obvious that they do not all mean the same thing. Just what *does* equality mean?

## What is Equality?

For two things to be equal means for them to be identical in some respect. Thus if two trees are both precisely 6 feet tall, they are equal in height. If two men both earn precisely \$9,500 a year, they are equal in income. And if two people both have the same chance of winning a lottery, they have (in that respect) equality of opportunity.

However, while two things may be identical with respect to one or a limited number of attributes, no two physical objects can ever be identical with respect to *all* attributes. For example, all atoms differ in position, direction and history. And all human beings differ

with respect to anatomy, biochemistry, temperament, knowledge, skills, goals, virtue and a thousand other characteristics.

Here we will primarily be concerned with three types of equality:

1. *Political equality*, a major goal of both the American and French revolutions, has *traditionally* meant equality of individual rights and equality of liberty. Stated simply, political equality means that the individual's right to life, liberty and property is respected and that government abstains from conferring any special advantage or inflicting any special harm upon one individual (or group) in distinction to another. Clearly, political equality is at best only approximated and never exists completely.

2. *Economic equality* means in essence that people have the same income or total wealth.

3. *Social equality* generally means either (a) equality of social status, (b) equality of opportunity, or (c) equality of treatment. Social equality is also increasingly coming to mean (d) equality of achievement.

## Equality and Liberty

A little reflection will quickly demonstrate that economic and social equality can only be achieved at the expense of political equality. Because people differ in ability, drive, intelligence, strength and many other attributes it follows that, with liberty, people also will differ in achievement, status, income and wealth. A talented singer will command a higher income than a ditch-digger. A frugal, hardworking man generally will accumulate more wealth than an indolent spendthrift. A brilliant scientist will command more respect than a skid row bum.

Nor are all of these differences of social and economic achievement the result of environment. Because people are individuals—genetically, biochemically, anatomically and neurologically—differences in strength, intelligence, aggressiveness and other traits will always exist. While environmental factors can and do exaggerate physical and

mental differences between people, diversity and non-equality remain the natural biological order and hence are the natural social and economic order.

There is only one way to make all people even approximately economically or socially equal, and that is through the forcible redistribution of wealth and the legal prohibition of social distinction.

Economic equality can thus only be maintained by totalitarian control of people's lives, and the substitution of the decisions of a handful of state authorities for the free choices of millions of men and women.

Political equality is fundamentally inimical to economic and social equality. Free men are not economically equal, and economically equal men are not free. Because the achievement of social and economic equality inherently requires the forcible interference with voluntary choice, I will subsequently refer to the doctrine that social or economic equality should be imposed upon a society as *coercive egalitarianism*.

## Equality as an Ethical Ideal

In reality people are unequal: Americans are—on average—far wealthier than Russians, doctors tend to earn more than garbage collectors, and so on. But *should* people be unequal?

At its root, egalitarianism is an ethical doctrine. It is often asserted that “ethics is just a matter of opinion” and that “one moral system is just as good as any other.” But in fact any ethical code can be judged by at least three criteria: (1) *is it logical*—have the basic concepts of the doctrine been meaningfully defined and are the arguments for it valid; (2) *is it realistic*—is it a doctrine which human beings can live by, or does it require that people act in a way which is fundamentally contrary to their nature; and (3) *is it desirable*—are the consequences of adopting the doctrine what are claimed, or would they be something entirely different; and if people adopt this doctrine will it lead to the creation of a society in which they are happy and fulfilled, or will it lead to a society of hopelessness, repression and despair?

Let us now apply these criteria to the doctrine of coercive egalitarianism.

1. *Is coercive egalitarianism logical?* Egalitarianism states that all people should be equal, but few coercive egalitarians define “equality.”

As stated previously, *complete* equality between people is an impossibility, so it can be rejected at once. But we are hardly better off when we speak of social or economic equality. Does “economic equality” mean equal income at a given age, for a given job, for a certain amount of work, or for a particular occupation? Does “equal wealth” mean identical possessions, possessions of identical value, or something entirely different? Does “social equality” mean equal status, equal popularity, equal opportunity, equal treatment, or what? All of these concepts of economic and social equality are distinctly different, and until they are defined, the doctrine of egalitarianism is illogical.

2. *Is coercive egalitarianism realistic?* People are different and have different values. To some happiness requires many material possessions, to others material possessions are relatively unimportant. To some people intelligence is a great value, to others strength or beauty are far more important. Because people differ both in their own characteristics and in the way in which they value traits in others, people will naturally discriminate in favor of some persons and against others.

Since variety and distinction are natural parts of the human condition, by demanding that people abandon such distinctions, coercive egalitarianism is contrary to human nature.

3. *Is coercive egalitarianism desirable?* Coercive egalitarianism, the doctrine of complete social and economic equality of human beings, logically implies a world of identical, faceless, interchangeable people. Such a world sounds much more like a nightmare than a dream, and indeed it is.

Perhaps no nation on earth has come closer to complete economic and social equality than Pol Pot’s Cambodia. Under Pol Pot’s regime entire populations were forcibly marched out of cities and everyone, regardless of age, sex, skills or previous social status, was forced to labor with primitive agricultural implements on collective farms. In

Pol Pot's Cambodia, everyone had to think, work and believe the same; dissenters were killed on the spot.

In northern Cambodia stands the remains of one of Pol Pot's "model villages." The houses are neat, clean and completely identical. Nearby sits a mass open grave with hundreds of human skeletons—the pitiful remains of those who displayed the slightest individuality. The village and mass grave are a fitting symbol of the fruits of coercive egalitarianism.

While coercive egalitarianism masquerades as an ethical doctrine, in fact it is the opposite. Ethics presumes that one can make a distinction between right and wrong for human beings. But coercive egalitarianism demands that we treat people equally, regardless of their differences, including differences in virtue. To demand that virtuous and villainous people—for example, Thomas Edison and Charles Manson—be treated equally, is to make ethical distinction impossible *in principle*.

In summary, coercive egalitarianism is illogical because it never defines precisely what "equality" consists of; it is unrealistic because it requires that we deny our values; and it is undesirable because it ultimately requires a society of human insects.

While coercive egalitarianism fails as an ethical doctrine, many contentions based upon coercive egalitarianism nevertheless remain emotionally compelling to many people. Let us now examine some of those contentions.

## Myths of Egalitarianism

1. *Social and economic inequality are a result of coercion, an accident of birth, or unfair advantage.* Let us consider these contentions one at a time.

It is certainly true that *some* inequality is a result of coercion in such forms as conquest, theft, confiscatory taxes or political power. But it is hardly true that all inequality is a result of coercion. A person can, after all, become wealthy or popular because he or she is highly talented or extremely inventive, and talent and invention coerce no one.

Being born wealthy certainly constitutes an advantage, but hardly an insurmountable or unfair one. Sociological studies in the United States and Europe show tremendous mobility between lower, middle and upper classes, despite advantages and disadvantages of birth. Except for all but the greatest fortunes, one's parents' wealth and success are no guarantee of one's own wealth or success. And there is nothing immoral about helping out one's own children as much as possible. Such aid takes away nothing to which anyone else is entitled.

Last, there is the argument that being born with below average intelligence, or strength, or attractiveness constitutes an "unfair disadvantage." Here egalitarianism reveals itself to be (in the words of Dr. Murray Rothbard) "a revolt against nature." We can either act rationally and rejoice in our diversity and make the most of the abilities we do have, or we can damn nature and hate everyone who is in any way better than we are and attempt to drag them down to our level. I leave it to you which is the more rational and humane policy.

*2. If people would only share the world's bounty equally, there would be enough for everyone, and no one need starve or be seriously deprived.* This contention is based upon two false assumptions: (a) that wealth is a natural resource, so one person's gain is another's loss; and (b) that if the world's wealth were equally redistributed it would remain constant.

Wealth in fact is a product of human productivity and invention. Some people are poor *not* because others are wealthy, but because the poor are insufficiently productive (often because of authoritarian political systems).

Any attempt to redistribute the world's wealth by force would also greatly diminish the total wealth in existence for at least three reasons: (a) large scale redistribution would disrupt the world's productive machinery, (b) confiscation of wealth would destroy the incentive to produce more (why bother producing if it's going to be taken from you anyway), and (c) the process of redistribution would require an enormously costly and essentially parasitic bureaucracy. (Not to mention losses from shooting people who resist, and starvation from bureaucratic inefficiency and mistakes.)

The cure for poverty is more productivity, less state economic intervention, and an end to barriers to trade. The cure is not redistribution of wealth.

3. *It is better that everyone be poor than for some to have more than others.* Better for whom? For the middle class and wealthy stripped of their property? For the poor robbed of the possibility of ever improving their lot?

The production and accumulation of wealth is the benchmark of human progress. Wealth in the form of better communications systems, environmental control, pest control, improved transportation, better medical care, more durable and attractive clothing, more comfortable housing and so on, *ad infinitum*, improves the quality and increases the quantity of human life and makes possible leisure, science and art. To attack wealth is to attack an essential condition for the achievement of virtually every human value from the fulfillment of physiological needs, to safety, to the pursuit of beauty and truth.

This argument reveals the ultimate and ugly motive of many egalitarians: A hatred of human ability per se. By that hatred they betray their human heritage and would condemn men to exist at the level of barbarians.

### **Free and Unequal vs. Coercive Egalitarianism**

Equality of rights and equality under the law are preconditions for any just and humane society. But such political equality is the very antithesis of coercive egalitarianism.

Coercive egalitarianism asserts that people ought to be made equal *by force*, and that ability and virtue should be ignored or punished to bring all people down to the lowest common denominator.

The disabilities of others should evoke our compassion. But those disabilities do not justify the forced looting of the productive or the obliteration of liberty in the name of some undefined concept of equality.

The natural order of human society is diversity, variety and inequality. The fruits of that natural order are progress, productivity and invention. In the final analysis, virtue and compassion can only flourish in a world of men and women free and unequal.

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