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# *Moral Equality for the Least Advantaged*

*Dewayne Winrow*

The civil rights struggle of the sixties was a movement by people who historically had been on the underside of the American dream. It was mainly a struggle for social justice, narrowly viewed—a demand for social inclusion and social equality. However, in the post-sixties era, the more radical wing of the civil rights movement took center stage. The emphasis of those in the radical wing, namely, the black nationalist and feminist movements, was on not civil rights, but human rights. Their struggle, though often misguided, was not simply for social equality and inclusion, it was for moral equality as a basic human entitlement.

The purpose of this article is to highlight the tension between moral and social equality. My thesis is that moral equality, a fundamental moral principle, is the absolute principle that should fashion non-absolute social practices, policies, and arrangements. All social praxis must be sensitive to changing circumstances; the more basic concomitants of moral equality must constantly measure that praxis.

Moral equality affirms the postulate that all persons have the same intrinsic worth. That is in no way to say that all people are or should be equal in all respects. As is often the case, human beings may be unequal in talents, in contributions to social life, and in valid claims to rewards and resources. However, everyone who is a person is presumptively entitled to recognition of that personhood. That is the starting point for moral reasoning.

The first premise of moral equality is that all people are of the same kind: they are alike in morally relevant ways. All normal persons are roughly equal in moral competence and vulnerability. They have much the same capacity for moral choice with respect to their personal lives. Despite differences in culture, experience, character, and education, there are no moral elites. All people are sinners, affected by the problem of human finitude. All are in need of moral guidance. A corollary notion is that all humans are roughly equal in their capacity to become fully realized persons. Everyone possesses a socially formed self and can invest that self with intrinsic worth. The differences among people are highly individual, not systematic.

## **A Normative Idea**

Moral equality is a normative idea, the chief covenantal principle of a moral community. The Judeo-Christian tradition strongly associates the righteousness of the covenant community with concern for the poor and powerless, for “the least of these my brethren.” In Matt 25:31–46 those placed on the king’s left hand (the place of disfavor) evidenced their unrighteousness by their failure to treat the disadvantaged as “brethren.” It is also significant that the marks of lostness Jesus mentions in this narrative are not gross sins committed but rather simple acts of kindness not committed. Indeed, the issue is not the particular



*sins* of omission mentioned here, but the *sin* of unrighteousness. Faith righteousness is the fundamental covenant requirement. It is a righteousness that is acquired through sharing by faith the character of Him who is wholly other-regarding.

Although moral equality is a normative idea, it is an idea derived from human experience. The criteria of equality—the respects in which people are to be considered equal—derive from our understanding of what they need to sustain their dignity as persons.

### The Essentials

The definition of what is vital to the status of personhood establishes what is essential human equality. The claim to essential equality is a claim to what social theorists once called “natural rights.” It is a claim for life itself and the conditions that make life possible, tolerable, and hopeful. In the words of the *Declaration*, essential equality means that all persons have an equal claim to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” On the other hand, all persons do not have a claim to equal prosperity, good fortune, or happiness; they do not have a claim to an equally good life or to the fullness of social goods or values. An equal right to hold property is not a right to equal property. Moral equality calls for a baseline of entitlement to basic social goods that affirms the personhood of all human beings.

### Moral Equality and Social Praxis

As we effect the transition from covenantal principle to community practice, or from animating ideal to going concern, the principle becomes ambiguous and vulnerable. It is often hard to disentangle *moral* from *social* equality. The present state of social discourse and debate is indicative of this problem.

Radical egalitarianism sees no difference between the two. But although they are connected in important ways, they are also distinct. Moral equality is a starting point for moral discourse. It is a basis for regulating social practices such as equal treatment, protection, and opportunity. It is also a basis for criticizing social inequalities of rank, opportunity, and resources, which are sometimes necessary and desirable. The following examples will suffice.

### Equal Treatment

Beyond the claims of essential equality, there is no requirement that everyone be treated alike. Equal treat-

ment is often inappropriate. What is appropriate is treatment as an equal. Affirmative action policy builds upon the implicit distinction between equality of treatment and equality of consideration and respect. Equality of treatment may run counter to equality of consideration and respect. Equality of consideration means giving the same weight to every person’s dignity and welfare: it demands that we take into account circumstances.



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In his book entitled *Taking Rights Seriously*, Ronald Dworkin offers an insightful example. He states, “If I have two children, and one is dying from a disease that is making the other uncomfortable, I do not show equal concern if I flip a coin to decide which should have the remaining dose of a drug.” This example shows that the right to treatment as an equal is fundamental and the right to equal treatment, derivative. Once one takes circumstances into account and identifies a class of persons—that is, similarly situated persons—equal treatment may be the best way of assuring equality of respect and concern. Social policy that is sensitive and circumstantial is equal treatment for everyone who is “similarly situated.”

### Equal Opportunity

In the ethos of classical liberalism, the key to reconciling moral and social equality is equality of opportunity. Equality of opportunity is a fundamental moral claim. One should not mistake it as a claim to equal conditions or as a rejection of all socially derived inequality. The real enemy to the ideal of moral equality is the caste principle. Whatever opportunities exist should be open to all without regard to social class, race, creed, ethnicity, or gender.



The target is overcoming prejudice (personal bias) and racism (institutional discrimination). Thus equality of opportunity has the limited objective of overcoming prejudice while maintaining the legitimacy of differential rewards.

Making good the transition from principle to practice can be troublesome. One must constantly ask whether the ideal is made good in reality. Is equality of intrinsic worth being fully recognized in fact—say, through effective equality of opportunity?

Social inequalities are a pervasive fact of human existence. It is perverse and unrealistic to demand their total eradication. Inequality may be good for prosperity, scholarship, art, family life, warfare, and much else; furthermore, it may be an inescapable fact, whatever its utility. Those justifications, however, do not speak to the moral issue. They do not bring the other-regarding policy to the center of concern. They do not tell how to make inequality part of the moral order. It is to this question that we now turn our attention.

### **Moralizing Social Inequality**

John Rawls, in his book *Justice as Fairness*, sets forth a conception of what he calls the “difference principle.” Rawls does not argue for full social equality. On the contrary, he assumes that inequalities are inevitable and that one can justify them in many ways. He argues that while social inequalities may be necessary and desirable, one must judge their moral worth by what they contribute to the welfare of the least advantaged. That principle strongly echoes the Judeo-Christian association of righteousness with concern for the poor and powerless, for “the least of these my brethren.”

For Rawls, all social values, such as liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the bases of self-respect, are to be distributed equally. An equal distribution of any or all of these values is justifiable if it is to everyone’s advantage. His premise upholds equality as a fundamental value but also recognizes that other values, such as prosperity and security, are important to human well-being. In reaching for difference values, moral equality cannot be compromised—but social equality is necessarily given up. The challenge is to preserve the former while sacrificing the latter. The difference principle purports to meet that challenge by insisting that inequalities be justified by their contribution to “long-run expectations of the least fortunate group in society.”

That requirement cannot be too easily satisfied. A weak form of the difference principle will not carry its weight against a heavy burden of inequality and domination. If all one asks is that everyone gain something from a system of inequalities, one satisfies the condition too easily. A system of trickle-down economics might fulfill the difference principle in a weak form, but that is not what Rawls has in mind. The difference principle is not to be satisfied by *any* benefit. Rather, inequalities are to be arranged so that they are “to the *greatest* benefit of the least advantaged.” In principle, inequality is morally justified if it does more than equality can do to improve the prospects of the least advantaged. A feasible alternative that does as well or better with less inequality should, however, be preferred.

Rawls’ difference principle is not contrary to the biblical notion of social justice. In the biblical view, a community’s righteousness is measured by its treatment of the powerless in society, which the Bible often describes as the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the stranger (non-Israelite) in the land. In that view, belief in the moral equality of the least advantaged establishes an obligation of assistance. Inequality as such is not the issue; it is not a question of requiring those who have more to help those who have less just because they have less. The case is more desperate. The obligation is to people who are degraded because of their disadvantage, to people who are in danger of being excluded or forgotten as objects of moral concern.

In conclusion, the concept of community generates expectations for effective or full membership. It is not enough to restrain or even to overcome the divisiveness of stigma. The dignity of community membership carries with it a panoply of duties and rights, including rights of participation. A society committed to moral equality needs to find ways to uphold the ultimate worth of persons. A moral society will uphold every person’s moral worth without regard to differences of talent, effort, or character. That requires a more integral, more communitarian conception of how moral and social equalities are related.

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