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Think Interview: What Is Equality and Why Does It Matter?

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Abstract

This is an interview with Elizabeth Anderson about her classic paper 'What is The Point of Equality?' (published in *Ethics* in 1999) In this interview, Elizabeth outlines and clarifies the argument of that paper, and goes on to explain how her views have since changed.

Introduction

In her classic paper 'What is The Point of Equality?' (published in *Ethics* in 1999) Elizabeth Anderson argues that many philosophers have lost sight of why equality really matters. In this interview, Elizabeth outlines and clarifies the argument of that paper, and goes on to explain how her views have since changed.

S.L. Elizabeth, your paper is critical of a lot of philosophical theorizing about equality, and especially of a particular way of thinking about what justice involves. Would you please outline for us what you think has gone wrong, and perhaps provide a few examples?

E.A. I wrote 'What is the Point of Equality?' because I thought that discussions of equality had converged on a view of what an egalitarian society would look like that was wildly detached from the concerns of historical and current egalitarian social movements. These movements were and are centrally concerned with ending oppressive social hierarchies, and replacing such unjust systems with institutions through which people relate to one another as equals. I called the view I was attacking 'luck egalitarianism' and the view I was advocating 'relational egalitarianism' or 'democratic equality'.

So let's start with luck egalitarianism. The view begins with the intuition that there are some goods that ought initially to be distributed equally across individuals, whether they be resources, rights, well-being, opportunities to acquire such goods or some other goods. We can set aside disputes over what those goods are and just call whatever should be equalized the 'equalisandum'. But we also want people to have various freedoms with respect to the use and disposition of these goods. Freedom implies that individuals may put their possession of these goods at risk and may also win significant gains from doing so. Go helicopter skiing, and you might get a serious injury that requires an expensive rescue. Invest in a tech startup that succeeds, and you might become a billionaire. The exercise of freedom disrupts equal distributions. Intuitively, it is unfair for the helicopter skier to expect everyone else to make up for the costs of their indulgence in such risky and

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expensive recreations. And it seems also that the tech entrepreneur deserves to be rewarded for their initiative, risk-taking and innovation. On the other hand, inequalities in goods that arise from brute luck, for which individuals are not responsible or which they don't deserve, are unfair. Taken together, these intuitions support the luck egalitarian principle: that inequalities due to brute luck should be eliminated, but inequalities due to choices for which individuals are responsible, or which they deserve, should be permitted.

I argue that luck egalitarianism misses the point of equality, of what egalitarian social movements have always rightly sought.

Luck egalitarianism, in stressing the distinction between luck and choice, effaces the far more important distinction between inequalities due to oppressive social hierarchies, and innumerable idiosyncratic inequalities between individuals that are morally irrelevant even if they are due to brute luck. Consider two babies. One is born temperamentally happy, and the second is born temperamentally wildly happy. Has the first baby suffered some cosmic injustice just because the second was, through pure luck, born happier? I think there is no injustice at all in this inequality. Injustice implies that there is a victim with a legitimate complaint against some agent or collectively instituted social arrangement that ought to be changed. I think the happy baby has no legitimate complaint because the cosmos itself is not an agent and cannot be unjust. Nor does the happy baby have a legitimate complaint against the wildly happy baby. That baby has done nothing wrong. Resentment of the wildly happy baby is mere envy, which is a vice.

Injustice arises solely from the actions of human beings, and it arises overwhelmingly from the institutional arrangements we collectively establish. Has society somehow victimized the merely happy baby for failing to make it as happy as the wildly happy baby? I see no grounds for thinking this. It is impossible to make everyone equally happy, or even just plain

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happy. Society may be able to supply most of the conditions for avoiding abject misery and afford opportunities for individuals to seek their happiness. But they are not responsible for every feeling an individual may have.

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In any event, egalitarians are not concerned with every last injustice in the world. They are concerned with injustices that consist in some kind of social inequality. Innumerable minor injustices – for example, a teenager shoplifting candy from a store – are wrong, but do not constitute any kind of social inequality. Even major crimes, such as murders, typically do not do so. Egalitarians focus on a subset of injustices, the ones that arise from oppressive social hierarchies. These are inherently group-based. Such hierarchies set some groups – aristocrats, plutocrats, slaveholders, patriarchs, exalted races, castes, religious groups and so forth – above other groups. They grant unaccountable power, factitious esteem, and unjust superior standing to exalted groups, who use their institutional advantages to dominate, stigmatize and reduce subordinate groups to no-counts. This is oppressive.

Egalitarians aim to replace these hierarchies with societies in which everyone treats everyone else as an equal. In a society of equals, many innumerable irrelevant inequalities may emerge between individuals for diverse, idiosyncratic reasons. Star athletes win the acclaim of their fans. The superior athletic achievements and virtues which are the basis of their esteem result from a combination of lucky natural talent and deserved hard work. It is impossible to disentangle the relative contributions of luck and choice here. Nor is there any reason to do so. As long as star athletes are not granted arbitrary powers over others, or special privileges, and as long as no one is required to honour them, no objectionable or oppressive inequalities emerge from letting fans esteem whom they want. People who aren't fans of the sport are free to ignore this, or even to disdain athletic achievement altogether.

My dissertation adviser, John Rawls, argued that the primary subject of justice is what he called the 'basic structure' of society. These are the institutions that are fundamentally responsible for the structure of opportunities people face. He argued that once we establish rough, bounded equality at the level of the basic structure, then there is no reason to keep track of the innumerable inequalities that arise from inscrutable combinations of luck and choice, because none of these inequalities will fundamentally matter. None will be convertible into the oppressive subordination, stigmatization or marginalization of others. Everyone will enjoy equal basic liberties and fair equality of opportunity for jobs with more responsibilities and higher pay. Income and wealth inequalities will be modest, because higher pay at the top can only be justified if it is necessary to bring up the bottom. In a free society of equals, individuals have innumerable other opportunities for gaining esteem in other domains.

I think Rawls gave us a good start on considering some of the distributive requirements of a society of equals. But I agree with many critics who rightly complained that, in focusing on class inequality, he didn't come to terms with

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social hierarchies based on gender and sexuality, race, (dis)ability, and other bases of social hierarchy such as caste and religion. In addition, in focusing on self-contained societies, he did not do much to address the vast global inequalities arising from the nation-state system, the legacies of colonialism, migration, war, global trade regimes, climate change, and many other problems that cross national borders.

More fundamentally, in focusing on distributive justice, Rawls overlooked forms of injustice that don't consist in unequal distributions of any particular good but that nevertheless figure in systematic unequal social relations. Consider, for example, the infrastructure of transportation and communication networks, public accommodations, and the like. These can be built in ways that either include or exclude people with various disabilities. If the streets lack curb cuts for wheelchairs and multistorey buildings lack elevators for people who can't climb stairs, people with certain disabilities have been excluded even though such public infrastructure is the same for everyone and not divided among them in separate parcels. More generally, people may fail to treat others as equals through group segregation, even if what each group has is materially equal. As the Supreme Court claimed in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the decision that overturned racially segregated school systems, separate but equal is inherently unequal. Even if, contrary to fact, schools set aside for different races were equally funded and staffed with equally good teachers, the bare fact that whites imposed segregation on blacks constituted blacks as a stigmatized, inferiorized caste. This is no way to treat others as equals. As I have argued in *The Imperative of Integration*, such racial segregation, even if no longer imposed by law, undermines democracy, which is the central way citizens of the same country relate to one another as equals in the domain of public government. This is why I think that egalitarianism needs to be understood relationally, in terms of how we relate to each other, and not just in terms of the quantitative equivalence of our separately distributed possessions. The common infrastructure of civil society must be inclusive and positively promote intergroup interaction on terms of equality. This requires moral and cultural transformation, not just equal distributions of various goods.

S.L. Some might say that we can deal with systematic unequal social relations by embracing a liberal approach – an approach that focuses on freedom. We just need to ensure no one interferes with or prevents others from being able to do what they want. A segregationist system that keeps races apart while treating them equally is restricting where citizens can go. A transportation system that installs gates that unintentionally block wheelchair users restricts their ability to travel. Can't we achieve the kind of equality you desire by adopting the liberal principle that individuals and the state ought not to restrict the freedom of citizens to do what they want, go where they want, meet whom they want, and so on?

E.A. What you call the liberal principle would work against legally mandated racial segregation. But it would permit pervasive racial discrimination in employment in private firms, private firm segregation of public accommodations such as hotels, restaurants, theatres, buses, retail shops, and so forth. It would permit racial and other group-restrictive covenants on property – private agreements of everyone in a neighbourhood to bar the sale of their home to blacks, Jews, and so forth, and thereby permit de facto racially segregated public schools, if students are assigned to the school closest to their home. During the Civil Rights Movement, it became clear that merely eliminating legal mandates was not sufficient to open up real freedom – that is, effectively accessible opportunities – for blacks to compete for better jobs, homes, schools, and so forth. Whites owned nearly all the property, were pervasively antiblack, and ostracized any whites who treated blacks fairly. Under these conditions, white people's freedom to discriminate in access to desirable economic and educational opportunities amounted not just to a radical constriction of blacks' opportunities, but to the perpetuation of blacks' stigmatized status and their subjection to exploitation. Blacks, confined to a few neighbourhoods where whites didn't want to live, often had to pay higher prices for crowded slum housing than whites had to pay

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for nice housing in the same city. White people's power to arbitrarily restrict black people's opportunities subjected blacks to the pervasive domination of whites. Subjection to the domination of another is a form of unfreedom. It is also a form of unequal social relation. Here is where the values of freedom and equality coincide.

'With ever-widening inequality of wealth in the twenty-first century, it is clear that wealth has too many ways to buy political influence, even in states that have vastly tighter restrictions on private money in electoral politics.'

From Reconstruction to the Civil Rights Movement, whites frequently complained that the enforcement of antidiscrimination laws forced them into unwilling 'private' association with blacks, as if involuntarily encountering a black person on a bus or at school were the same as being forced to befriend or marry that person. The common idea that liberalism, as a political doctrine, is based on the separation of 'the public' from 'the private' sphere encourages this confusion. In fact, liberalism depends on a more fine-grained differentiation of social spheres. Even at the most abstract level, a society needs three distinct social spheres, subject to different rules, to count as a fully liberal, free and open society: (1) a private sphere of intimate association, encompassing family and friends as well as private associations such as clubs and churches; (2) a public sphere of democratic governance – of the state; and (3) an intermediate sphere of 'civil society', in which people with different social identities from different walks of life can relate to one another as equals for production, commerce, communication, public entertainment and innumerable forms of non-intimate social interaction, much of which is spontaneous or serendipitous. The sphere of civil society encompasses public accommodations of all kinds, all commercial operations open for business with the general public, public streets and parks, workplaces, public schools, and publicly funded private schools. Without an expansive and robust civil society, where people are entitled to treatment as equals, democracy is impossible. For democracy is not merely a set of legal institutions, such as periodic elections for representatives to law-making bodies. It is also a set of cultural practices through which diverse people from different walks of life can communicate their perspectives on the common problems we face as a polity, and cooperate as equals. Equal citizenship, a core principle of democracy, deeply depends on extensive spaces of civil society in which we interact as equals. If the people who own commercial and residential property are free to discriminate in selling, leasing and hiring, they will constitute themselves as a superior class that hoards opportunities and subjects the excluded to demeaning and domineering treatment.

For more on this point, I encourage people to read chapter 5 of my book *The Imperative of Integration*, in which I explain how this lesson was learned in the US in the era from Reconstruction to the Civil Rights Movement. Antiracist activists taught Americans this profound lesson in the essential requirements for democratic equality. Now, with campaigns against 'diversity, equity, and inclusion', we are in deep danger of forgetting those lessons.

S.L. Is there anything you have since changed your mind about since writing the paper, or would argue differently?

E.A. In 1999, when I wrote 'What is the Point of Equality?', I was open to the possibility that egalitarian constraints at the top of the income distribution might be relaxed, consistent with

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democratic equality, provided that sufficiently tight legal constraints on converting wealth into political power could be created so as to ensure that voters are still equals with respect to elections and all other aspects of government operations. If the only thing great wealth could buy was mega-yachts, why should anyone care? No one is forced to admire the people who own such monstrosities.

Now I think I was wrong to suppose this might even be possible. With ever-widening inequality of wealth in the twenty-first century, it is clear that wealth has too many ways to buy political influence, even in states that have vastly tighter restrictions on private money in electoral politics. In Germany, members of the Green Party took bribes from fossil fuel interests and voted in their favour. The EU brutally punished Greece during the financial crisis around 2007 just to bail out northern European banking interests, even though far more equitable solutions could have been adopted – as they were during the pandemic. They served the wealthy over ordinary people. In the US, we are in the throes of a massive democratic backsliding into competitive authoritarianism. I don't think this would have occurred in the absence of radical wealth inequality. It's ultimately a slide into oligarchy. From the start, democratic theorists have worried that excessive wealth inequality would undermine democracy. These theorists were correct all along.

But I was wrong in other ways about this.

First, great wealth does not always exercise political power through control or excessive influence over the state apparatus. Since 1999, I have become interested in the power that employers exercise over workers. In *Private Government: How Employers Rule Our Lives (and Why We Don't Talk about It)* (Princeton University Press, 2017), I argue that the typical US workplace is a little dictatorship, in which employers exercise vastly greater power over employees than can be justified by legitimate interests in productive efficiency. Workers are entitled to a voice in the governance of the firm to protect them from domination and ensure that their interests are served. Large firms also dominate citizens at large when they enact business plans that have vast negative effects on communities, state economies and even global sustainability. Amazon got off the hook from operating a dangerous warehouse by threatening to leave the state in which it was located. Now the big tech companies are threatening to deploy AI to wipe out most people's jobs, leading to a situation in which everyone lives at their mercy and virtually all wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few top tech executives. And the fossil fuel companies have manipulated public opinion through mass disinformation campaigns to turn people against alternative energy, which is not only cleaner and cheaper, but is necessary to stop runaway climate change catastrophes.

Second, I have learned that truly vast concentrations of wealth cannot be accumulated by means consistent with relational equality. They arise through the exploitation of monopoly power, vastly unequal bargaining power, closing off exit options for counterparties, price discrimination, predatory and reckless finance, displacing business risks onto the public, and so forth. I discuss many inegalitarian business models in my most recent book, *Hijacked: How Neoliberalism Turned the Work Ethic Against Workers, and How Workers Can Take It Back* (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

Third, I am persuaded by Thomas Piketty's argument about the cultural impact of vast wealth inequality in his book, *Capital in the 21st Century* (Harvard University Press, 2014). Piketty argues that at a certain point of wealth accumulation and concentration, the share of national income taken by capital will vastly exceed the share paid to workers. At that point, it will be impossible to get ahead by working hard. The only way really to make it in society will be to inherit great wealth, or to marry someone very rich. Under such conditions, people who work for a living lose any respectability. Esteem will be monopolized by the idle, decadent, useless and exploitative rich who live off the labour of others. Such an economy of esteem is patently incompatible with a society of equals, or even with basic virtue.

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So, in the end I have come around to my dissertation adviser John Rawls's view: some kind of egalitarian distributive principle in the neighbourhood of his difference principle, under which relative economic gains to the top can only be justified if they are needed to make the worst off as well off as possible, is needed to secure a society of equals. We might even need something more strict, such as Ingrid Robeyns's limitarianism, which puts a strict cap on top incomes (*Limitarianism: The Case Against Extreme Wealth*, Penguin, 2024).

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