

1 EQUALITY OF WHAT?

1.1. WHY EQUALITY? WHAT EQUALITY?

Two central issues for ethical analysis of equality are: (1) Why equality? (2) Equality of what? The two questions are distinct but thoroughly interdependent. We cannot begin to defend or criticize equality without knowing what on earth we are talking about, i.e. equality of what features (e.g. incomes, wealths, opportunities, achievements, freedoms, rights)? We cannot possibly answer the first question without addressing the second. That seems obvious enough.

But if we *do* answer question (2), do we still *need* to address question (1)? If we have successfully argued in favour of equality of x (whatever that x is--some outcome, some right, some freedom, some respect, or some something else), then we have already argued for equality in *that* form, with x as the standard of comparison. Similarly, if we have rebutted the claim to equality of x, then we have already argued against equality in that form, with x as the standard of comparison. There is, in this view, no 'further', no 'deeper', question to be answered about why--or why not--'equality'. Question (1), in this analysis, looks very much like the poor man's question (2).

There is some sense in seeing the matter in this way, but there is also a more interesting substantive issue here. It relates to the fact that every normative theory of social arrangement that has at all stood the test of time seems to demand equality of *something*--something that is regarded as particularly important in that theory. The theories involved are diverse and frequently at war with each other, but they still seem to have that common feature. In the contemporary disputes in political philosophy, equality does, of course, figure prominently in the contributions of John Rawls (equal liberty and equality in the distribution of 'primary goods'), Ronald Dworkin ('treatment as equals', 'equality of resources'), Thomas Nagel ('economic equality'), Thomas Scanlon ('equality'), and others generally associated with a 'pro equality'

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