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The Christian Revolution

2: Equality

Michael Jensen

I

After liberty, equality may be of all the political concepts the most adored. It is part of the self-mythology of western societies that they see themselves as treating their citizens with equality; the struggle for equality is part of the story we tell ourselves as defining what we most like about our society. Leading liberal philosopher Ronald Dworkin contends that equality is the ‘sovereign virtue’ of political community.¹ Partly this is a response to the evils that come with inequality. The hideous crimes of racism abounding in modern history leave us feeling nauseous, or ought to; likewise, few would seriously advocate a return to the systemic inequitable treatment of women of only a generation ago. It is the feeling of the natural right-ness of equality that is behind the greatest statement of equality in the modern era, the US Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal, and that they are endowed with certain inalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Equality is, apparently, obvious, a self-justifying idea, occurring in nature like some biological specimen or a mathematical principle, whose benefits must surely flow if governments have the will to pursue it.

Equality is an idea that reaches desperately for foundations and/or an articulation that will give the best practical outcome. Equality is a fine idea, but it is not self-evident, despite what the Declaration of Independence says. ‘Nature’ most certainly does not confer a self-evident equality on human beings, but rather quite the opposite. We are born with different capacities and abilities, into different families and in different places. In fact, the social Darwinians of the nineteenth century were able to mount a case from their reading of nature that some races were inherently superior and some were by nature sub-human. In our own day, leading Australian ethicist Peter Singer certainly questions the natural right of the severely disabled to an equality of life among healthy human beings; and at the same time suggests that equality

should be extended to animal life.² Without a real grounding of equality, there is no reason we should prefer it or pursue it. We need at least to ask ‘equality with respect to what’?

One type of theory of equality claims that in some way human beings are equal in the essence—‘ontologically’ equal, in other words. One way of approaching ontological equality is to propose that human beings have a ‘natural’ equality. To claim that human beings share a natural equality is not a recommendation: it is a proposition that is either true or false. ‘Natural’ equality suggests that human beings have an equal starting point in some way. It does not take much to see that human beings do not have natural equality in all respects, so natural equality usually has to be narrowed to an *aspect* of human being. It might be perhaps that we have the same powers and faculties, or the same dignity. It could be that we have equal wants, at least in a general sense. Or it could be that there are no significant racial differences. Kant’s ‘Categorical Imperative’ directs that a kind of equal respect needs to be accorded each human being. This assumes, of course, that a kind of natural equality amongst human beings is obvious to all (rational) observers. Human beings must be ascribed the same value because they are (apparently) equally valuable. Yet, as we have seen, observation of nature does not necessarily lead us to that conclusion at all.

More pragmatically, thinkers like John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin have given themselves to determining strategies for achieving a degree of social equality. Dworkin presents his case thus—

individuals should be relieved of consequential responsibility for those unfortunate features of their situation that are brute bad luck, but not from those that should be seen as flowing from their own choices.³

At the heart of his political theory is the need to distinguish between fair and unfair differences in wealth. As such, he calls for a massive redistribution of wealth and resources in order to remedy the forces of chance. The free market does not distribute wealth justly, according to Dworkin, because it rewards not just choice or hard work, but also the unchosen talent that a person has. Superior talent—the result of mere good fortune—should not result in a great portion of society’s resources. Why should cricketer Shane Warne be paid so handsomely for his ability to cast a ball twenty-two yards, for example? What

counts as a wealth-talent seems to be randomly ascribed. Why shouldn't governments act to remedy this inequality?

However, the difference between bad luck and culpable hard times may not be as easy to discern as Dworkin imagines. For example, is the poverty and plight of an alcoholic the result of his bad luck in being treated abusively in the past or even in his genetic makeup, or due to his own stupidity? My own Australian society struggles to determine this in the case of its indigenous inhabitants partly because this line is such a fine one. We may also quibble that Dworkin is inconsistent in demanding equal distribution of wealth, but not of education. His assumption in discussing the subject of equality is that 'equality' means some form of economic equality. Why this form and not, say, political equality? Though Dworkin denies he is elucidating some form of ontological or natural equality, he still fails to explain *why* equality should be pursued as the paramount social virtue—unless to make the *a priori* assumption of an ontological equality.

Without a theology of equality, then, there is no coherent philosophy of equality. Indeed, there are a number of political philosophers who have recognised the necessity of giving a theological account of equality. R. H. Tawney put it as nakedly as this: 'in order to believe in human equality' he said, 'it is necessary to believe in God.'⁴ Nietzsche, who hated the idea, blamed it on Christians.⁵ In the seventeenth century, John Locke, considered the founding father of political equality, explicitly anchored his account of equality in a thorough exegesis of the Scriptures.⁶

It would also be well to point to the fact that while on the face of it equality has supremacy as an ideal, the reality of the world is that it is becoming more unequal, not less. We have a taste for inequality, and we like it. In his recent book *Status Anxiety*, the philosopher Alain de Botton argues that we have exchanged aristocracy not for social equality but for meritocracy, partly because we love to think that we may be better than someone else.⁷ The rhetoric of equality adjusts at this point to speak of 'equality of opportunity'. Citizens of the great democracies of the West may consider themselves egalitarian, but growing social inequalities are apparent in the distribution of wealth.⁸ Women are still massively under-represented in parliaments and on company boards and earn on average significantly less than men. Once again speaking in the Australian context, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are ten per cent more likely to be

unemployed, three times more likely to lose a child in infancy and have a life expectancy a full eighteen years less than other Australians.⁹ Similar figures of social disadvantage could be cited for all the Western democracies.

Equality, then, proves to be a troublesome notion. Although it is a term with an enormous evocative power, it is not at all obvious that a compelling philosophy of equality has emerged. That the ideal of equality can be made coherent in a secular society in which theological talk is proscribed is doubtful. Furthermore, societies in the secular liberal west are, in fact, proven to be at odds with their own rhetoric about equality.

II

What theological account of equality can then be given? While the roots of the virtue we now think of as ‘equality’ are certainly biblical and theological, the Bible itself does not give us a theology of equality *per se*. This is because, instead of speaking in terms of equality as some attribute that belongs to each human person, or inheres in him or her, it rather addresses *my* responsibility to God for others. Equality, I wish to argue, is in fact a minimum requirement far exceeded by the vision of interpersonal relationships offered us in the Scriptures. If anything, it is the byproduct of *love*.

The great command of God to humankind, after love of God, is to love your neighbour as yourself. In the teaching of Jesus, the great example of love for a neighbour was aptly named ‘Good Samaritan’ (Luke 10:25-37).¹⁰ The Samaritan is notable because he has no regard for the national, racial and cultural divisions that would normally separate human beings—potential neighbours—from each other. The Samaritan at least realizes that the God who created all is the God of all: he is a true monotheist. What the Samaritan did right was in seeing himself in the stricken man enough that he could love him. When you love God with all your heart and all your strength and all your mind you love him as the maker of all; and it will lead to discovering as neighbours even those who are beyond the boundaries of the chosen people. It is the Samaritan who truly obeys the ancient law and, ironically, this outsider can call himself a member of the people of God. Søren Kierkegaard once wrote—

The neighbour is the absolutely true expression for human equality. In case everyone were in truth to love his neighbour as himself, complete human

equality would be attained. Everyone who loves his neighbour in truth, expresses unconditionally human equality.¹¹

As Bernard Wannenwetsch explains, this biblical picture of ‘neighbourliness’ exceeds the self-determined ‘solidarity’ of which some liberals speak.¹² That this command comes from the God who requires whole-hearted love of himself is a remarkable affirmation from him, not only of the worth and dignity of all human beings, but of their call to the service and care of one another.¹³

The original condition of humankind as described in Genesis 1 was marked not so much by its equality, but by its mutuality. Equality is the corollary of the relations we see described. The stamping of all humankind with the image of God—male and female—is immediately a signal that human beings are ordered to one another from a basic equality in relationship to God. As Oliver O’Donovan writes—

The equality of human beings is an aspect of the doctrine of creation. It locates every human being equally to every other as one summoned out of nothing by the creator’s will, one whose life is a contingent gift, created for fellowship with others and answerable to judgement.¹⁴

There is not a difference between them before God—though they share with one another in him. Among the animals, Adam can find no suitable companion, no-one to with whom he can be bound together in loving co-operation. When Eve is made he instantly recognises her sameness to him: she is, as he says, ‘bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh’. She is the one with whom dominion may be shared and with whom the task of filling the creation may be undertaken. The difference of male and female is not at all a difficulty for the Scriptures’ account of their essential equality and complementarity. It is worth noting, too, that here there is no need at this point for a principle of equality of resources—the abundance and fertility of the earth and the ease with which the ground may be worked means that scarcity isn’t a problem. No method of fair distribution or right to property needs to be envisaged.

However, with the fall, as we read it in Genesis 3, their relationship was soured into domination, inequality and subordination. The mutuality of the relationships are disturbed, as Eve is told that her husband will rule over her. Inequality is a

punishment: gender relations are from then imbalanced in this sinister way (Gen. 3:16). Further, the fall introduces the problem of uneven distribution of scarce resources. The earth will not now be as co-operative and as yielding as it was.

One equality surely remains: God holds human beings equally accountable to him in his judgement of them. Even the election of Israel did not undermine this claim: in fact, as they discovered, they had been chosen for the sake of all the nations. Israel's God was, as they testified, the creator God, and so he could not be the God of Jews only, but the God of Gentiles too (Rom. 3:29-30). A mark of the worth and dignity of each human being is that God asks each to answer for what he or she has done. As illustration of this final judgement perhaps, it was clear that before the law each Israelite stood equal: 'You shall not render an unjust judgement, you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbour' (Lev. 19:14-15).

Something else is announced in the Bible under the category of God's judgement: God will not ignore the ongoing injustice of social inequality—the rapacious greed, the lust for power, the abuse of the poor, the neglect of the widow and the orphan, the abuse of the alien (see e.g. Deut. 27:11-16; Amos 4:1-5:27). In fact, he will treat them preferentially. The prophets deliver the promise—further expounded by Jesus himself—that God will overturn the power structures of the world: as Mary puts it, the rich will go away empty and the poor will be filled (Luke 1:52-3). Luke's gospel is replete with tales of how the coming of Jesus Christ restores the long-neglected social balance among the people of God (Luke 12:13-21; 14:15-24; 16:19-31; 19:1-10).

This announcement is tantamount to a command to communities to ensure that they are not marked by these catastrophic imbalances in terms of justice and resources. It isn't, however, a demand for an equal distribution of resources. This would be to think of God's blessing as somehow limited and in need of careful management. The poor are an emergency that demands a response not merely because of the difference in possessions, but because poverty causes suffering and alienation. They are also evidence of the lovelessness of the rich. The gospel itself takes us even further. Paul's gospel is the power of God for the salvation of *all* who believe, regardless of nation (Rom. 1:16-17). Justification by faith is a message of basic equality: for faith costs nothing and earns nothing. It is nothing in which one can boast.¹⁵ In the people of God,

constituted on the basis of this free gift, there is to be found a spiritual equality, embedded in mutuality, that does not expunge social distinctions but rather relativises them. This is symbolically expressed in eating together. Meals were especially significant for the first Christians, as eating together enacted the relativising of worldly distinctions between believers. By all accounts it was a remarkable community: as Luke describes it in Acts 2:37-47, the Jerusalem church engaged in a generous mutual sharing of material things with one another. In the decades that followed, however, Paul was dismayed at the way in which the social distinctions and arrogance had crept into the church in Corinth as they celebrated the Lord's Supper. Onesimus the slave was to return to his master Philemon: but to be welcomed back as a brother.¹⁶ James rebukes his readers for observing favouritism with regard to the wealthy in the handing out of significant seats (James 2:1-6). The equality of the believers was not held to be a merely spiritual reality: it was to be expressed in the practices of the church—in their responses to the needs of one another.

The Bible's account of equality, then, does not mean the erasure of all difference. This would be far too unexciting. In fact quite the opposite: though it promises the restitution of injustices, the Bible celebrates and delights in difference. The complementary difference of male and female is not dissolved by their basic created sameness, or by their union together in Christ.¹⁷ Just as the Old Testament described the king as merely a leader of his peers rather than a superior order of being, the New Testament recognises that people are differently gifted to serve without there being a qualitative or essential difference between them; and that the exercise of authority in churches is not by definition a mark of unequal relations. What we have from the Bible is not a bland, levelling equality: rather we have an equality that is the by-product of love—the seeking of an imbalance in favour of the other according to needs. On the other hand, the secular western liberal accounts of equality—represented here by Dworkin—flounder because they struggle to clarify which type of equality should be society's aspiration and fail to show that, without a theology of equality, human beings are 'inherently' or 'naturally' equal at all. The challenge for the churches of Christ is to discover in our mutuality the essential equality that we know we have in Christ while maintaining the richness of, and delight in, our differences.

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ENDNOTES

1. R. M. Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000).
2. See Paola Cavalieri & Peter Singer, *The Great Ape Project: Equality Beyond Humanity* (London: Fourth Estate, 1993).; Peter Singer, *Embryo Experimentation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1990).
3. Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality*, p. 287.
4. Duncan B. Forrester, *On Human Worth* (London: SCM Press, 2001) quoting J. M. Winter & D. M. Joslin, R. H. Tawney's *Commonplace Book* (Cambridge: CUP, 1972), p. 53.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
6. J. Waldron, *God, Locke and Equality—Christian Foundations in Locke's Political Thought* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002). Waldron comments wistfully that the founding text of political equality would find no place in a modern secular classroom.
7. Alain De Botton, *Status Anxiety* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2004).
8. 'While the mean household net worth of all households in Australia in 2005-06 was AUD\$563,000, the median (i.e. the mid-point when all households are ranked in ascending order of net worth) was substantially lower at AUD\$340,000. This difference reflects the asymmetric distribution of wealth between households, where a relatively small proportion of households had high net worth and a relatively large number of households had low net worth.' Statistics available from <<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/>>
9. Statistics available from <<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/>>
10. For aspects of this reading, see N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God, Christian Origins and the Question of God*; Vol. 2. (London: SPCK, 1996), p. 304-7.
11. Quoted in Forrester, *On Human Worth*, p. 97.
12. Bernd Wannewetsch, *Political Worship: Ethics for Christian Citizens*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 222. The example cited is Richard Rorty.
13. Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1986).
14. Oliver O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005), p. 41.
15. This is the logic of Romans 3:21-31.
16. Wannewetsch, *Political Worship: Ethics for Christian Citizens*, p. 152.
17. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace—a Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 184-5.