

**CREATING HUMAN VALUE:**  
A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE  
ON EQUALITY IN DEMOCRACY

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A major debate continues in democratic societies over the meaning, definition and implementation of equality. In particular, differing views persist over the requirement for social equality to give political equality its legitimacy. This leads to the debate over the effectiveness of equal opportunity regimes inherent in many liberal democratic societies and the call for equality of outcomes by many socially oriented proponents who represent particular minority groups. Arguably, however, the existence of equal opportunity regimes is not at fault, but the lack of collective understanding and appreciation of the social issues impinging on the formal and substantive means of achieving human equality. By exploring the nature and purpose of the ideal of human equality, and the cultural dimension of equal opportunity, it is possible to arrive at an understanding where the goal of human equality becomes comprehensive and complete, accomplishing both the social and political demands for equality in democratic societies.

In exploring the ability to achieve social and political equality, it is necessary to first define what constitutes a 'democratic society' and a 'democratic state.' Whether one talks about society or the state, democracy has generally been considered a form of human organization where in one form or another, the collective 'people' hold the political power. This ultimately leads to the "deeply rooted conflict about whether democracy should mean some kind of popular power (a form of politics in which citizens are engaged in self-government and self-regulation) or an aid to decision-making (a means of conferring authority on those periodically voted into office)" (Held 5). But, both forms of democracy imply particular virtues on the individual citizen, such as equality among citizens, liberty, respect for the law, and justice, which must be developed within the citizen and protected from illegal, immoral, and unethical authorities for democracy to be effective (5). Thus, the concept of democracy includes a symbiotic relationship between the social and political, providing the basis from which to argue the need for social equality for effective political equality.

This leads to the discussion on the philosophical significance of the ideal of human equality in democracies. As it will become apparent, the different interpretations of equality by different theorists leads to the apparent divergence in applying equality through equal opportunity or equal outcome regimes. To begin, a fundamental aspect of equality in liberal theory is “the idea that all people have equal moral worth and deserve equal concern and respect simply because they are autonomous agents with self-determining capacities...in accordance with one’s interests, projects, and goals” (Koggel 42). That is to say, because each person has the innate human potential to make their own decisions based on their own instincts, interests, and desires, “every person is entitled to equal concern and respect *as a person*” (Dagger 27, his emphasis).

This all-encompassing definition of human equality appears simple enough, but it becomes difficult to implement in practice. This is apparent from a theoretical point of view since “from the time of Aristotle, political theorists have given different accounts of what makes people equal” (Koggel 13). This had led to different practical definitions for equality which “[have] often associated [equality] with the same quantity, degree, merit etc. or having the same rights, privileges, etc,” leading to different approaches in implementing the ideal of equality (Corsianos 2). Dagger points out, however, that the foundation of human equality is often confused between

two distinct concepts: human worth and human merit. Merit is a grading concept, and even the staunchest egalitarian can readily admit that degrees and differences of merit exist among human beings. But, Vlastos points out, we cannot grade people according to their *worth* because human worth is something that must inhere in each individual as a person without regard to his or her merits. Thus, the indisputable fact that some people are superior to others in some way, or even a number of ways, cannot count against the claim that all human beings are entitled by virtue of their equal worth to be treated as equals (27).

Some may debate over the significance, if not the existence of human worth, as Dagger suggests, but he notes that “the very attempt to find a property or capacity of this sort, and trump up “evidence” to prove that some people or peoples lack it, testifies to the strength of the conviction that every person is in some sense equally worthy of respect and concern” (Dagger 28). We may not be able to prove the existence of human worth, but the fact that everyone is looking for it is a sign that everyone wants it or believes in its necessity to living a productive, valuable life. Kymlicka adds that for individuals to lead the ‘good life,’ they must “have the conditions necessary to acquire an awareness of different views about the good life, and an ability to examine these views intelligently” (81). Perhaps Taylor puts it best when he states “what is picked out as of worth here is a *universal human potential*, a capacity that all humans share” (41). What is of paramount importance in human equality is understanding, and accepting, the idea that each individual has this innate potential, and so it is society and the state that bears the responsibility to fully utilize that potential.

In practice, this need for human worth as the foundation of human equality presents itself through the concepts of human freedom and justice. Justice, which can be defined briefly as “rightfulness or fairness, can refer to equality of membership in society, or it can refer to freedom of society’s members...[and can become] associated with notions of equality or freedom, depending on the values and interpretations applied to them” (Corsianos 1). Arguably, human equality plays a role in both freedom and justice, but with different ends in mind. At one extreme, freedom calls for the unfettered ability to fulfil one’s desires by freeing one’s ability to

choose from any and all impediments. That is, to have the ability “to lead our life from the inside, in accordance with our beliefs about what gives value to life...[and to] be free to question those beliefs” (Kymlicka 81). Justice, at the other extreme, calls for the need for some kind of equality of opportunity, usually legal, which can easily lead to particular restrictions on one’s freedom of choice. Both justice and freedom situate themselves such that, it appears that they stand on opposite ends of the spectrum, but arguably, they complement each other in establishing human equality. Freedom is the ability for a person to exercise their moral imperative, while justice provides the fair, common ground from which to share their equality with others. Thus, both justice and freedom-which accept as their foundation, and attempt to implement in their practices, the ideal of human equality-lie at the heart of the debate over the implementation of human equality between equal opportunity and equal outcomes.

How justice and freedom complement each other requires an understanding in the purpose of equal opportunity regimes. Koggel quotes Nielsen in defining equal opportunity as “the ideal of making opportunities for the various cherished positions in society completely open to free competition in which everyone can compete for those prized positions in society” (70). Because each individual has the same potential to make choices, each individual should have “the resources to pursue their interests, projects and goals” (Koggel 86). This definition has a liberal tone as it emphasizes the individuals opportunity to compete for what they want on an equal footing. This ‘level playing field’ is established in two ways. The first means of equal opportunity is through the formal institution of rules and laws that promote equal opportunity, but also through “the removal of the laws that forbid [people] from competing” (Koggel 72). The second means is through what Koggel defines as substantive equal opportunity where equality is further achieved through

positive measures for redistributing wealth and giving everyone a fair chance to compete in the race of life...Positive social and welfare rights to health care, work, and education are examples of measures defended by substantive equality theorists as necessary for achieving equal opportunity and treating all people with equal concern and respect (Koggel 78).

Arguably, these two means of equal opportunity relate to justice and freedom respectively, and complement the two related poles of human equality inherent in both. On the one hand, the formal, legal form of equal opportunity adheres to the equality inherent in the concept of justice. By providing the formal rules from which to act, one provides a venue that gives each individual the same opportunity to fulfil their interests. The substantive form of equal opportunity adheres to the equality inherent in the concept of freedom by providing each individual the opportunity to fulfil their interests with relatively the same level of resources as someone else.<sup>1</sup>

While it appears that liberal thinkers have ‘covered all the bases’ with respect to equal opportunity, one aspect that some liberal thinkers do not address is the existence of non-legal barriers to equal opportunity. Theoretically, because each individual possesses the equal capacity to choose based on their own moral imperative, they should be given a ‘level playing field’ from which to begin establishing their life. In reality, however, there exists a history of discrimination, prejudice, and outright exclusion of particular groups of people. And so, what some thinkers neglect is the fact that “formal equality alone cannot erase the effects of a past, a historical context, in which treating like cases alike meant that features of some individuals were

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<sup>1</sup> While this sounds socialist in orientation, it is meant to emphasize the welfare aspect of modern liberal democratic societies, where the state provides some level of redistribution or equalization to give the less advantaged a relatively stronger opportunity to compete and participate in social and political affairs.

used to justify what is in fact unequal treatment. Members of groups discriminated against in the past have other barriers and obstacles to overcome besides those set out in the law” (Koggel 82). Arguably it is this combination of equal opportunity and social inequality manifested through discrimination, prejudice and exclusionary thinking that instigates the demand for reforms in the instruments of human equality.

With this brief examination of human equality and the role and significance of equal opportunity regimes, one can begin to explore the question over the need for social equality in achieving political equality. As the above exploration of equal opportunity suggests, there is a need for social equality to legitimize political equality in democratic societies. Whether one views democracy as participatory or representative, both require a reasonably equal citizenry, in the sense that each has the ability to make political decisions. From a democratic theory perspective, this could mean taking the argument down the ‘liberal versus socialist democratic debate,’ but arguably, liberal democratic organization is sufficient to provide comprehensive human equality from its understanding of freedom and justice as outlined above. From a cultural standpoint, this means that individuals must have the freedom to establish a strong cultural identity for themselves from which to make their choices.

Arguably, culture plays an important role in fostering human equality, if only because it influences one’s morals, and that influence exists within a given human community. An effective definition of culture is Kymlicka’s notion of a ‘societal culture,’ “that is, a culture which provides its members with meaningful ways of life across the full range of human activities, including social, educational, religious, recreational, and economic life, encompassing both public and private spheres” (Kymlicka 76). Culture is significant because it contextualizes an individual’s freedom to choose “amongst various options...Our society culture not only provides these options, but also makes them meaningful to us” (83). This is possible because “the ability to treat each person with equal concern and respect is achieved not through the monological thinking of a solitary and isolated moral reasoner, but through a communicative process of an ongoing dialogue among different points of view” (Koggel 5). That is to say, culture is significant because it is the frame of reference individuals have within a given human community to make moral decisions. To have some level of cultural inequality, arguably leads to inequality of the individual, as they are unable to be fully free to make political choices given some discrimination and/or prejudice about some aspect of their identity which they have no control over, thus limiting their opportunity.

Given the significance of culture in the individuals’ attainment of human equality, there is justification in providing particular culturally based measures to ensure equal opportunity. These can vary from public policies of multiculturalism, to the granting of group-differentiated rights, to the more invasive and direct policy of affirmative action. These measures have the goal of achieving a kind of social equality by using justice as a means of encouraging individual freedom stifled by discrimination, prejudice and exclusionary thinking. This is vital for political equality because ultimately democracy “requires a sense of community...and is by no means incompatible with the existence of a diversity of particular interests. Open communities will not crush group identities or impose a transcendental will in the way that authoritarian regimes have sought to do” (Resnick 116). Assuming all members of a particular state share the same political rights, freedoms, and responsibilities, arguably it is necessary for society to reflect these political rights, freedoms and responsibilities in order for them to be legitimate and useful.

There can be no political equality if society does not reflect that political reality. If groups who are socially disadvantaged because of discrimination, prejudice, or ignorance by a

dominant culture, then the political community fails in its responsibilities, whether it is a participatory or representative democracy. It fails in a participatory way because social discrimination excludes them from their basic political right to participate in the decision-making process, and thus takes away a significant avenue in the application of their right to choose. It fails in a representative way in that the political representatives do not in fact represent the socially discriminated group because, in one sense or another, that group is ignored in the political sphere, removing their voice in the decision-making process. Thus, with social inequality, in the face of what appears to be political equality, there is nothing more than a political oligarchy where the dominant culture makes decisions with little, or no input from socially disadvantaged groups existing within the overall political community.

The argument thus far appears straightforward enough, however, it is not without its critics. At the most fundamental level, the idea of having 'substantive equal opportunity' appears in direct opposition to individual equality. Arguably, however, the goals of substantive equal opportunity are in line with liberal theory since it emphasizes the idea that citizens within a polity are interdependent. As Dagger notes, "even the [most] independent person remains dependent on others in various ways. We are *interdependent* in other words, and a proper understanding of autonomy and civic virtue leads us to recognize and appreciate this basic fact of life" (18, his emphasis). Most political theories and philosophies note in one way or another, the significance of human community. People do not exist purely as individuals, and it is through our interactions and relationships that we develop the capacities to make choices that we deem to fulfil our interests. Resnick lists a host of prominent theorists, such as "Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor, or Michael Walzer, [who] make the case for seeing community as constituting the necessary foundation for any kind of social order" (132). Koggel notes that it is our social relationships that "underlie the very language of equality" (2). Thus, by providing a basic standard of social or economic equality through substantive equal opportunity measures, one is, in essence, establishing a minimum value on human worth, which lies at the heart of human equality.

A second criticism that arises from the argument involves the cultural dimension of substantive equal opportunity. Many theorists have, and do make the case that culture is an inadequate, even dangerous means of attaining social equality. This criticism bases its weight on the fact that culture is a social, and collective phenomenon which seems to be in opposition to the liberal emphasis on the individual. As Fierlbeck articulates, "it would seem that the difficult political issues involve the assertion that some individuals, by virtue of a particular group affiliation, have rights that others do not and cannot have" (11). Furthermore, culture is an exceptionally vague concept, and to give a collective group protective rights would seem to open a Pandora's box of conflicting rights, leading to greater social disintegration.

There are two ways to answer these criticisms on the need for cultural protection. The first is very simple: just because culture is a vague concept, it doesn't necessarily mean that it should not be protected. Arguably, the idea of the individual is no less vague than the idea of collective culture. Even still, the vagueness of culture could arguably be the result *of* the vagueness in defining the individual. The difficulty in explicitly establishing the value of human worth is a testament to that. Even if we don't know exactly the value of human worth, it doesn't mean we ignore it; the fact is, all of us value it, and if that is enough to value individualism, why can't our value of culture garner the same emphasis--especially if it strengthens individual worth?

This question leads into the second answer to criticisms over culture, which is that culture is worth protecting, not because it is valued by itself, but because it strengthens the equality of the individual in society. As was mentioned above, equal opportunity does not exist inside a historical vacuum. Even concepts such as equality, freedom, and justice did not develop separate from particular social norms that excluded some for the benefit of others. Substantive equal opportunity exists firstly to protect the individuals' right to equal access to the limited resources of society in a welfare sense, and secondly, to correct historical inequality, injustice, and exclusion in society.

Interestingly, these policy initiatives are not inconsistent with the way democratic societies have developed. That is to say, society and politics have changed to not only suit the times, but improve on the mistakes of the past. Representative democracy was initially seen as a solution to the flaws and inadequacies of Athenian participatory democracy. As Held notes, "the theory of representative democracy fundamentally shifted the terms of reference of democratic thought: the practical limits that a sizeable citizenry imposes on democracy...where practically eliminated. Representative democracy could now be celebrated as both accountable and feasible government, potentially stable over great territories and time spans" (11). Liberal theory has also evolved through time, establishing new, inclusive understandings on social and political organization. Thus, it is arguable that the value of cultural equal opportunity regimes is not in conflict with liberal theory, but in fact is a modern extension of it, recognizing yet another social element that needs to be addressed in order for social and political equality to exist.

It is important to realize that culture, while being a significant source of moral influence and guidance, it is not the only source to influence individual morality. It is, arguably, one of the more pervasive sources because culture provides the basic lens from which one looks at the world. Of course culture changes over time, and even one's perception of the world changes over time, influencing one's moral outlook, however, the value and worth of culture, like the worth of the individual, should not be forced to prove its merit for protection.

By recognizing the importance of culture in the formulation of individual choices, with a liberal understanding of human equality which manifests itself through freedom and justice, one discovers the value in having substantive equal opportunity regimes in order to promote and protect social equality to give political equality its legitimacy. Key to understanding the need for cultural protection in substantive equal opportunity regimes is appreciating the purpose of these measures. The goal is to provide each individual of a particular community the equal opportunity to advance his, or her, own life. This does not mean that each individual must be the same, and free of differences. It means that we, as a society, and as a political community, must realize the difficult nature of human existence. To secure our own happiness, we must have the opportunity to fortify our self worth through democratic measures, which means each of us must have an equal footing from which to create value in our lives. Clearly, given existing discrimination, prejudice, even hatred of particular groups, by particular groups, such a state of equality has yet to fully exist. But for our own individual benefit, it is in our best interest to continue encouraging and developing the ideal of human equality, ensuring our continued evolution towards a free and just society.

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