



INSTITUTE FOR PRINCIPLE STUDIES

ESSAY

Equality and Liberty: Friends or Foes?

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Equality is an often-cited virtue in our society, but depending on how we define equality, it may be more vice than virtue. What exactly is the equality that we think we value? Before we say that we favor equality, we must first determine what we want to be equal. What does it mean to say that we want equality for mankind? Do we want everyone to be of equal height, equal intelligence, equal talent, or equal wealth?

An important premise: human beings have unequal talents

Biological equality is neither possible nor desirable. All of our thinking must include this important premise. All reasonable observations tell us that men are not created biologically equal. Some have incredible athletic prowess – most do not. Some have amazing intellect – most do not. Some have the Midas touch for investing and making money – most do not. We must conclude, therefore, that biological inequality is a fact of life – a logical necessity. There is little or nothing that we or our governments can do about it. Some people will be talented athletes, some will be intellectuals, but others will be somewhat ordinary, and still others will have disabilities that limit their skills.

In recognition of this premise, many would desire to use the force of government to level the playing field. Either implicitly or explicitly, a large percentage of our population would advocate the use of government to attempt to produce this kind of equality – either in whole or in part.

There are three possible ways for government to approach equality. Government can attempt to create: 1) equality of outcome, 2) equality of opportunity, or 3) equality under the law. Let's examine each of these in more detail.

Equality of outcome

If people are inherently unequal (our first premise) and if our objective is to produce equality of outcome, then we must treat people unequally. With respect to material wealth, the only way to produce similar outcomes is to hinder the creative and productive individuals and to subsidize the less productive. We can value equality of opportunity or equality of outcome, but not both. If each person has different talents and abilities, it is illogical to expect that, if left alone, they would all manifest equal achievement.

There is a whole basket full of reasons why the force of government should not be used to produce equality of outcome. From a biblical perspective, we observe that God does not see equality of outcome as a necessary, or even a desirable, end. In the Old Testament, God frequently bestowed blessings unequally. Job was greatly blessed and then made to suffer sickness and poverty. Job's condition, whether rich or poor, served God's sovereign purposes. The patriarchs were very wealthy compared to much of the population. All of Scripture assumes the inequality of the human condition. In Matthew 26:11, Jesus tells us that the poor will always be with us (the same point is made in Deuteronomy 15:11).

In First Corinthians, chapter 12, Paul tells us that every believer has different roles and talents in the church body – equal concern for each other, but not equality of gifts. Even Christ, having the very nature of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped (Philippians 2:6).

If we advance the premise that all human beings have different skills, talents, and abilities, then we can conclude that the result of these differences will be to produce widely disparate outcomes in life.

From a pragmatic perspective, there are a number of reasons why forced equality is bad for society. It reduces productivity, dulls incentive to work and produce, and it rewards mediocrity. Historically, all attempts to produce equality of outcome have made the people poor and miserable. We must not forget that this concept of forced equality is the central component of Karl Marx's dictum, "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need." Voluntary sharing is a virtue, but forced sharing is a vice.

From a principle perspective, we cannot have government engage in the redistribution and regulation that is necessary to bring about equality of outcome without giving it absolute, totalitarian power. To allow the necessary redistribution of resources, it would be necessary to abandon the idea of private property rights. All property, if it were in the control of someone who had more of it than the average citizen, could be subject to redistribution. This is one of many examples that demonstrates the necessity of a philosophy that places limits on government activity.

Some might reject the extreme notion of creating total equality, but desire a kinder and gentler form of government action that just attempts to lessen the amount of inequality. The principle idea is still the same even if the implementation is only partial. This kind of government action would still be without a legitimate source of authority to justify its actions.

Equality of opportunity

Many people who understand the inherent errors in attempting to produce equality of outcome will advocate equality of opportunity as the best goal for a society. I will readily grant that the goal of equality of opportunity is more desirable than that of equality of outcome, but even this goal is fraught with danger.

Let's start by asking a few key questions. Is there equality of opportunity when a child born into a wealthy family receives the best education and a healthy inheritance? Certainly, this child has more opportunity than a child born into poverty. Not that the child from the poor family cannot excel in life, but this "poor" child was not given equal opportunity.

Again, we could use the power of government to counter this supposed injustice. We could tax the rich to provide high quality education to all students. We could even take the more extreme measure of forcing the rich kid to go to the same public schools that everyone else attends. We could even abolish all right of inheritance – this would limit the uneven opportunity.

Like any effort to accomplish equality of outcome, however, equality of opportunity also cannot be achieved without violating property rights.

Equality under the law

Equality under the law is the only form of equality that should concern a good government. By providing equality under law, the government is keeping its house in order. It is not critiquing God, it is not second-guessing the free market, it is not regulating family life, and it is not violating property rights.

This is certainly what Thomas Jefferson had in mind when he placed these words into the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights...” He is not asserting that all men are equal in talent or wealth.

His context for his statement is in relation to God-given rights. He is asserting that men have equal rights and governments should not abridge these rights. Nowhere in the document does he discuss individual talent or wealth, so I find it impossible to believe that he had economic equality in view here. If human beings are endowed by their Creator with property rights (which was clearly part of Jefferson’s claim), then government-forced equality of outcome or equality of opportunity are both prohibited by his view.

Benefits of inequality

A study of Scripture seems to clearly indicate that God is not necessarily averse to many forms of inequality. There must be a reason for this. I would suggest that inequality of talent, outcome, and opportunity are highly beneficial to society as a whole and to the individuals in society – especially the “less equal”.

Those with more than their share of intelligence, talent, education, and wealth often contribute substantially to society. Innovation and productivity from these unequal individuals have improved the standard of living of all humans. It is said that a rising tide lifts all boats, and certainly there is considerable truth to the statement.

What about the needy?

Many people assume that helping the poor means striving for equality. This is not necessarily true. It is theoretically possible to eliminate poverty without achieving equality. It is also possible to achieve equality without eliminating poverty – this would be the case if we made everyone poor.

There is indeed a link between equality and poverty, but it is the reverse of what most people assume. It is the attempt of governments to produce equality that produces poverty. By redistributing wealth, these misguided government policies reduce the incentives for the

talented to produce more goods and services. This same redistribution also reduces work incentive for those who receive the distributions of resources.

This analysis, however, does not negate the need for charitable activity. There will always be those who legitimately need charity. Scripture frequently mentions the widow, the orphan, and the alien as examples of those who should receive charity. But these efforts to help those with legitimate needs should be voluntary, and they should not be carried out with the goal of achieving any form of economic equality. The best hope for the poor is to live in a plentiful society, one with lots of goods and services. This abundance of supply will keep prices as low as possible; this is a clear benefit to the poor. This general abundance and prosperity will also facilitate charitable giving. In short, it is the existence of inequality that drives the market forces that produce both wealth and charity.

Many of the government policies that attempt to produce equality of outcome or equality of opportunity have covetousness at the root. It bothers us if someone has more than we do. We prefer equality in poverty rather than inequality in prosperity. We seek equality in slavery rather than inequality in freedom.

Conclusion

What is the role of government relating to equality? The proper function of government is not to attempt to produce equality of opportunity. Neither is it to produce equality of outcome. Government's duty to its citizens, with regard to equality, is to treat its citizens equally under the law. This means that every citizen should be equally subject to the nation's laws. No more, no less!

The goal of equality can only be attained with the loss of property rights. We cannot take from some and give to others without negating the idea of private property, and without private property, there is no real liberty.

Both liberty and prosperity require inequality. When properly understood, inequality becomes a virtue. Any government attempt to attain equality, other than equality under the law, will only produce misery. ¶