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Equality and Respect

BY HARRY FRANKFURT

I.

1. LET me begin with a preliminary caution, and with a statement of intent. I propose to deal here with issues that pertain to the alleged moral value of equality. So far as I am aware, nothing that I shall say concerning these issues implies anything of substance as to the kinds of social or political policies that it may be desirable to pursue or to avoid. My discussion is motivated exclusively by conceptual or analytic concerns. It is not inspired or shaped by any social ideology or political interest.

2. I categorically reject the presumption that egalitarianism, of whatever variety, is an ideal of any intrinsic moral importance. This emphatically does not mean that I am inclined generally to endorse or to be indifferent to prevailing inequalities, or that I oppose efforts to eliminate them. In fact, I support many such efforts. What leads me to support them, however, is not a conviction that equality of some kind is morally desirable for its own sake and that certain egalitarian goals are therefore inherently worthy. Rather, it is a more contingent and pragmatically grounded belief that in many circumstances greater equality of one sort or another would facilitate the pursuit of other socially desirable aims. So far as equality as such is concerned, I am convinced that it has no inherent or underived moral value at all.¹

3. Some philosophers believe that an equal distribution of

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certain valuable resources, just by virtue of being egalitarian, is a significant moral good. Others maintain that what actually is of moral importance is not that the resources be distributed equally but that everyone enjoy the same level of welfare. All of these philosophers agree that there is some type of equality that is morally valuable in itself, quite apart from whatever utility it may possess in supporting efforts to achieve other morally desirable goals.

It seems to me that insofar as egalitarian ideals are based upon the supposition that equality of some kind is morally desirable as such, or for its own sake, the moral appeal of egalitarianism is an illusion. In my opinion, equality has no moral value in itself. It is true that, among morally conscientious individuals, appeals in behalf of equality often have very considerable emotional power; moreover, as I have indicated, there are situations in which morally pertinent considerations do indeed dictate that a certain inequality should be avoided or reduced. Nonetheless, I believe that it is always a mistake to regard equality of any kind as desirable inherently. There is no egalitarian ideal the realization of which is valuable simply and strictly in its own right. Whenever it is morally important to strive for equality, it is always because doing so will promote some other value rather than because equality itself is morally desirable.

In addition to equality of resources and equality of welfare, several other modes of equality may be distinguished: equality of opportunity, equal respect, equal rights, equal consideration, equal concern, and so on. My view is that *none* of these modes of equality is intrinsically valuable. Hence, I maintain that none of the egalitarian ideals corresponding to them has any underived moral worth. Once various conceptual misunderstandings and confusions are dispelled, it appears finally that equality as such is of no moral importance.

4. With regard to the inegalitarian conditions that prevail when socioeconomic classes are markedly stratified, Thomas

Nagel asks: “How could it not be an evil that some people’s life prospects at birth are radically inferior to others?” (1991, p. 28). The question has undeniable rhetorical force. It seems impossible that any decent person, with normal feelings of human warmth, could fail to recognize that radical initial discrepancies in life prospects are morally unacceptable and that a readiness to tolerate them would be blatantly immoral.

And yet, is it really indisputable that such discrepancies must always be so awful? Although the life prospects of those in the lower socioeconomic strata have nearly always been terrible, it is not a necessary truth that this familiar relationship must hold. Having less is compatible, after all, with having quite a bit; doing worse than others does not entail doing badly. It is true that people in the lowest strata of society generally live in horrible conditions, but this association of low social position and dreadful quality of life is entirely contingent. There is no necessary connection between being at the bottom of society and being poor in the sense in which poverty is a serious and morally objectionable barrier to a good life.

Suppose we learn that the prospects of those whose life prospects are “radically inferior” are in fact rather good—not as good as the prospects with which some others begin, but nonetheless good enough to ensure a life that includes many genuinely valuable elements and that people who are both sensitive and reasonable find deeply satisfying. This is likely to alter the quality of our concern. Even if we should continue to insist that no inequality can ever be fully acceptable, discrepancies between life prospects that are very good and life prospects that are still better may not strike us as warranting the hot sense of moral urgency that is evoked by characterizing every discrepancy of this kind as *evil*.

5. The egalitarian condemnation of inequality as inherently bad loses much of its force, I believe, when we recognize that those who are doing considerably worse than others may nonetheless be doing rather well. But the egalitarian position

remains misguided even when its moral claims are moderated. Inequality is, after all, a purely *formal* characteristic; and from this formal characteristic of the relationship between two items, nothing whatever follows as to the desirability or the value of either. Surely what is of genuine moral concern is not formal but substantive. It is whether people have good lives, and not how their lives compare with the lives of others.

Suppose it is suggested that a life that is radically inferior to others cannot possibly be a good life. It will presumably be conceded that one good life may be less good than another, and hence that *mere* inferiority does not entail that a life is necessarily bad. It might perhaps be conceded further that this is not entailed even by the fact that the one life is *considerably* inferior to the other. But suppose someone insists that the very notion of being *radically* inferior entails not merely that a life is less good than others, but that the life falls decisively below the threshold that separates lives that are good from lives that are not good.

Let it be accepted as a conceptually necessary truth, then, that radically inferior lives are invariably bad. In that case, it will be entirely reasonable to agree that the radical inferiority of some people's life prospects is indeed—as Nagel says—an evil. But why is it an evil? The evil does not lie in the circumstance that the inferior lives happen to be unequal to other lives. What makes it an evil that some people have bad lives is not that some other people have better lives. The evil lies simply in the unmistakable fact that bad lives are bad.²

6. When someone is wondering whether to be satisfied with the resources that are at his disposal, or when he is evaluating the level of his well-being, what is it genuinely important that he take into account? The assessments that we are supposing he wishes to make are personal: they have to do with the specific quality of his own life. What he must do, it seems clear, is to make these assessments on the basis of a realistic estimate of how closely the course of his life suits his individual

capacities, meets his particular needs, fulfills his best potentialities, and provides him with what he himself cares about. With respect to none of these considerations, it seems to me, is it essential for him to measure his circumstances against the circumstances of anyone else. Of course, such comparisons may often be illuminating; they may enable a person to understand his own situation more clearly. Even so, they are at best heuristic rather than criterial.

If a person has enough resources to provide for the satisfaction of his needs and his interests, his resources are entirely adequate; their adequacy does not depend in addition upon the magnitude of the resources that other people possess. Whether the opportunities available to a person include the alternatives from which it would be desirable for him to be able to choose depends upon what opportunities suit his capacities, his interests, and his potentialities. It does not depend upon whether his opportunities coincide with those available to others.

The same goes for rights, for respect, for consideration, and for concern. Enjoying the rights that it is appropriate for a person to enjoy, and being treated with appropriate respect and consideration and concern, have nothing essentially to do with the respect and consideration and concern that other people are shown or with the rights that other people happen to enjoy. Every person should be accorded the rights, the respect, the consideration, and the concern to which he is entitled by virtue of what he is and of what he has done. The extent of his entitlement to them does not depend upon whether or not other people are entitled to them as well.³

It may well be that the entitlements of all people to certain things are in fact the same. If this is so, however, it is not because equality is important. It is because all people happen to be the same, or are necessarily the same, with regard to the characteristics from which the entitlements in question derive—for instance, common humanity, a capacity for suffering, citizenship in the kingdom of ends, or whatever.

The mere fact that one person has something or is entitled to something—taken simply by itself—is *no reason at all* for another person to want the same thing or to think himself entitled to it. In other words, equality as such has no moral importance.

II.

7. Still, this is not the end of the story. Consider someone who is in no way concerned about equality for its own sake, and who is also quite satisfied that he has as much of everything as he can use, but who happens to have less of certain things than others have. The fact that he has been treated unequally might offend him, even though he does not object to inequality as such. He might consider the inequality between his condition and the condition of others to be objectionable, because it might suggest to him that whoever is responsible for the discrepancy has failed to treat him with a certain kind of respect. It is easy to confuse being treated with the sort of respect in question with being treated equally. However, the two are not the same. I believe that the widespread tendency to exaggerate the moral importance of egalitarianism is due, at least in part, to a misunderstanding of the relationship between treating people equally and treating them with respect.

The most fundamental difference between equality and respect has to do with focus and intent. With regard to any parameter—whether it has to do with resources, welfare, opportunity, respect, rights, consideration, concern, or whatever—equality is merely a matter of each person having the same as others. Respect is more personal. Treating a person with respect means, in the sense that is pertinent here, dealing with him exclusively on the basis of those aspects of his particular character or circumstances that are actually relevant to the issue at hand.⁴

Treating people with respect precludes assigning them special advantages or disadvantages except on the basis of considerations that differentiate relevantly among them. Thus, it entails impartiality and the avoidance of arbitrariness. Those who are concerned with equality aim at outcomes that are in some pertinent way indistinguishable. On the other hand, those who wish to treat people with respect aim at outcomes that are matched specifically to the particularities of the individual. It is clear that the direction in which a desire for equality points may diverge from the direction in which an interest in respect and impartiality lead.

8. Under certain conditions, to be sure, the requirements of equality and of respect will converge. It is important that this convergence not be misconstrued. Consider a situation in which no information is available either about any relevant similarities between two people or about any relevant differences between them. In that case, the most natural and the most sensible recourse is to treat both people the same—that is, to treat them equally. Now the fact that an egalitarian policy is the only plausible one under such conditions may give rise to an impression that a preference for equality is—as it were—the default position, which must be implemented in the absence of considerations showing that an alternative is required. Many thinkers do in fact claim that egalitarianism enjoys a presumptive moral advantage over other policies. In their view, it is always desirable for equality to prevail unless the initial moral superiority of an egalitarian policy is overcome by particular features of the situation at hand.

Isaiah Berlin advances this view as follows:

The assumption is that equality needs no reasons, only inequality does so. . . . If I have a cake and there are ten persons among whom I wish to divide it, then if I give exactly one tenth to each, this will not, at any rate automatically, call for justification; whereas if I depart from this principle of equal division I am expected to produce a special reason (1955–56, p. 132).

This sort of account appeals to many people; indeed, it is widely thought to be confirmed by elementary common sense. In fact, however, the assumption that Berlin enunciates is mistaken. Equality has no inherent moral advantage over inequality. There is no basis for a presumption in favor of egalitarian goals.

If it would indeed be morally correct to distribute Berlin's cake in equal shares, the explanation is not—as he supposes—that equality needs no reasons, or that egalitarian distribution enjoys an initial moral superiority over other alternatives. The critical feature of the situation, as he evidently imagines it, is that he has *neither* a special reason for dividing the cake equally *nor* a special reason for dividing it unequally. In other words, the situation is one in which he does not know *either* that the people among whom the cake is to be shared are alike in ways that warrant giving them equal shares *or* that they differ in ways that justify giving them shares of different sizes. He has no relevant information about these people at all.

This means, of course, that the relevant information available to him about each of the people is exactly the same: namely, *zero*. But if his relevant information about each person is identical with his relevant information about the others, it would be arbitrary and disrespectful to treat the people differently; impartiality requires that he treat everyone the same. So he *does* have a reason that justifies an egalitarian distribution of the cake. It is the moral importance of respect and hence of impartiality, rather than any supposedly prior or preemptive moral importance of equality, that constrains us to treat people the same when we know nothing that provides us with a special reason for treating them differently.

In cases like the one Berlin describes, it is merely a happenstance that the requirements of equality and of respect coincide. There may also be circumstances in which the coincidence of these requirements is not so contingent. Suppose we agree that everyone is entitled to certain things simply in virtue of being human. With regard to these

entitlements, individual differences naturally cannot provide any relevant basis for differentiating between one person and another; for the only characteristics of each person that are relevant—to wit, simply those that constitute his humanity—are necessarily shared by every other human being. Therefore, the criteria of impartiality and of equality must inescapably yield, in this case, the same result.

The fact that this sort of case requires equality is not grounded, however, in any moral authority that egalitarianism possesses in its own right. Rather, the claim of egalitarianism is derivative. It is grounded in the more basic requirements of respect and of impartiality. What most fundamentally dictates that all human beings must be accorded the same entitlements is the presumed moral importance of responding impartially to their common humanity, and not the alleged moral importance of equality as an independently compelling goal.

III.

9. What is it about impartiality, and about what I have been referring to as “respect,” that makes them morally imperative? Why is it important to be guided in dealing with people only by whatever it is about them that is genuinely relevant? There is a sense in which being guided by what is relevant—thus treating relevantly similar cases alike and relevantly unlike cases differently—is an elementary aspect of being rational.⁵ Being impartial and respectful is a special case of being rational in this sense. It might be suggested, accordingly, that the moral value of these ways of treating people derives from the importance of avoiding the irrationality that would be entailed by relying upon irrelevancies. But this only raises another question. What is the moral importance of avoiding irrationality?

10. It is desirable that people be rational. On the other hand,

this does not mean that irrationality as such is immoral. The fact that adopting a certain belief or pursuing a certain course of behavior contravenes the requirements of rationality does not entail that a moral imperative of some kind has been violated. People who reason badly are surely not, just on that account, morally culpable. So there must be something else about deviations from respect, besides the fact that they are breaches of rationality, that has a more immediate and a more specific moral import.

People who resent disrespectful treatment do so because, by its very nature, it conveys a refusal to acknowledge the truth about them.⁶ Failing to respect someone is a matter of ignoring the relevance of some aspect of his nature or of his situation. The lack of respect consists in the circumstance that some important fact about the person is not properly attended to or is not taken appropriately into account. In other words, the person is dealt with as though he is not what he actually is. The implications of significant features of his life are overlooked or denied. Pertinent aspects of how things are with him are treated as though they had no reality. It is as though, in denying him suitable respect, his very existence is reduced.

This sort of treatment, at least when it has to do with matters of some consequence, may naturally evoke painful feelings of resentment. It may also evoke a more or less inchoate anxiety; for when a person is treated as though significant elements of his life count for nothing, it is natural for him to experience this as in a certain way an assault upon his reality. What is at stake for him, when people act as though he is not what he is, is a kind of self-preservation. It is not his biological survival that is challenged, of course, when his nature is denied. It is the reality of his existence for others, and hence the solidity of his own sense that he is real.

11. Experiences of being ignored—of not being taken seriously, of not counting, of being unable to make one's presence felt or one's voice heard—may be profoundly

disturbing. They often trigger in people an extraordinarily intense protective response, which may be quite incommensurate in its vehemence with the magnitude of the damage to their objective interests that is actually threatened. The classical articulation of this response is in the limitlessly reckless cry to “let justice be done though the heavens may fall.” What leads to such an unmeasured and perhaps even self-destructive demand for redress is plainly not an appraisal of the extent of the injustice that has been done, nor is it an estimate of what it might actually take to undo the injustice. The demand issues in a less calculated manner from the unbearably deep suffering and dread that may be caused when people are treated unjustly—that is, when their personal reality is threatened by a denial of the impartiality that respect requires.

Demands for equality have a very different meaning in our lives than demands for respect. Someone who insists that he be treated equally is calculating his demands on the basis of what other people have rather than on the basis of what will accord with the realities of his own condition and most suitably provide for his own interests and needs. In his desire for equality, there is no affirmation by a person of himself. On the contrary, a concern for being equal to others tends to alienate people from themselves. It leads them to define their goals in terms that are set by considerations other than the specific requirements of their own personal nature and of their own circumstances. It tends to distract them from recognizing that their most authentic ambitions are those that derive from the character of their own lives and not those that are imposed upon them by the conditions in which others happen to live.

Needless to say, the pursuit of egalitarian goals often has very substantial utility in promoting a variety of compelling political and social ideals. But the widespread conviction that equality itself and as such has some basic value as an independently important moral ideal is not only mistaken. It is an impediment to the identification of what truly is of fundamental moral and social worth.

Notes

¹ In the introduction to their anthology *Equality: Selected Readings*, Louis Pojman and Robert Westmoreland attribute to me the view that, with regard to economic considerations, “in an affluent society we have a duty to provide for people’s minimal needs, but nothing further” (1997, p. 11). That is by no means my view. In an essay entitled “Egalitarianism as a Moral Ideal,” which was originally published in *Ethics* in October 1987 and then reprinted in my collection entitled *The Importance of What We Care About*, I argued that what is morally important is not that people have equal incomes or equal wealth but that each person have enough. By “enough” I meant enough for a good life, not—as Pojman and Westmoreland suppose—merely enough to get by.

² The fact that some bad lives are radically inferior to the lives of others may be quite relevant, of course, to social policy. That some have better lives makes it clear, for one thing, that better lives are possible. For another, the radical superiority of the better lives may suggest that the bad lives might be improved by using resources diverted from the better ones. These considerations have nothing to do, however, with whether or not equality itself is inherently valuable.

³ In *Inequality Reexamined*, Amartya Sen claims that “to have any kind of plausibility, ethical reasoning on social matters must involve elementary equal consideration for all at some level that is seen as critical (1992, p. 17). But what does “equal consideration” mean? Surely giving people equal consideration does not mean spending equal time or equal effort in considering their interests or their entitlements. Sen himself suggests that it has to do with avoiding arbitrariness: “the absence of such equality would make a theory arbitrarily discriminating and hard to defend” (*ibid.*). But avoiding arbitrariness has nothing to do with treating people equally. It is a matter of having a reasonable basis for treating them as one does. It would be arbitrarily discriminating to give greater consideration to one person than to another without having a reasonable basis for discriminating between them; and it would similarly be arbitrary to give both the same consideration when there is a reasonable basis for treating them differently. To avoid arbitrariness, we must treat likes alike and unlikes differently. This is no more an egalitarian principle than it is an inegalitarian one.

⁴ I am uncertain about the relationship between what I am

referring to as “respect” and what Avishai Margalit (1996) has in mind when he speaks of respect. In his usage, as I understand it, treating people without respect is closely linked to humiliating them or to giving them reason to feel humiliated. In my usage, this is not obviously the case. For one thing, since the value assigned to respect may be overridden by other values, people often prefer—sometimes for perfectly good and even admirable reasons—to be treated as though they have characteristics that they do not have or as though they lack characteristics that they actually possess. This means that they prefer to be treated without what I am calling “respect,” but it is not at all clear that they are inviting humiliation. I recognize that it is rather dissonant to characterize such people, in the way I do here, as trying to avoid being treated respectfully. A disinclination to appear and to be treated as what one is may sometimes suggest a lack of *self-respect*, perhaps, but not always. I have been unable to design a more suitable terminology.

⁵ What counts as relevant and what counts as irrelevant may often depend heavily, of course, upon moral considerations.

⁶ As I suggested in endnote 4, someone who wishes to conceal or to misrepresent the truth about himself may welcome being treated without respect. In what follows, I shall be concerned only with cases in which a person resents disrespectful treatment.

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