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Equality: A Continuing Dialogue

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Abstract

We reply to discussions of *Equality: From Theory to Action* by Harry Brighouse, Joanne Conaghan, Cillian McBride and Stuart White. We find many of their points helpful and treat them as a useful contribution to a continuing dialogue on egalitarianism.

Keywords: egalitarianism, equality, institutional design, political strategy, social justice, social systems

Equality: A Continuing Dialogue

Our primary hope in writing *Equality: From Theory to Action*[1] was to contribute to the global movement for a more egalitarian world. We are therefore strongly encouraged by the seriousness with which our commentators have treated our work and with their generally positive responses to it. Since it is central to our understanding of the equality movement that no one knows all the answers and that the movement draws strength from diversity, we wish to engage with these commentaries in a spirit of solidarity. What we say in this short response is therefore meant as a contribution to a dialogue which we hope others will continue.

Equality was written in three parts, addressing The New Equality Agenda, Putting Equality into Practice, and Strategies for Change. All four of our commentators have focused on aspects of the second part, and so we follow this focus here. Since their comments overlap to some degree, we have chosen to respond to them thematically, in the order in which we address these themes in our book.

In our discussion of policies for promoting economic equality, we concentrated on the potential of neocorporatist institutions to address the issue of economic inequality and presented, as an example, the type of intervention they might use to control inequality in primary incomes. Neocoporatist institutional planning, through the social partnership process, has been the core of macroeconomic policy in Ireland since 1987. As Stuart White points out, this proposal is far from the only strategy available to egalitarian policy-makers, and we welcome his discussion of policies for promoting the crucial objective of greater equality of wealth. Indeed, we recognise that paid employment is only one aspect of income and that income inequality is primarily generated through the concentration of ownership of wealth.[2] Our modest proposal is a starting point, not the end of the line.

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[1] John Baker, Kathleen Lynch, Sara Cantillon, and Judy Walsh, *Equality: From Theory to Action* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).
[2] Ibid., p. 77.

Although the policies White canvasses are very interesting and have real potential for attacking unequal wealth, they do little to address issues of unequal power in capitalist economies. Indeed, he seems to be favourably disposed to the idea of keeping the management of businesses 'firmly out of the hands of politicians or civil servants'. While we acknowledge that some forms of public ownership are open to criticism, we view this kind of remark as too complicit with the neoliberal attack on public services to be passed over lightly. One of the advantages of neocorporatist planning is precisely that it operates at a national level to constrain the power of the capitalist class and that it can be, and has been, used to introduce elements of democracy into the governance of capitalist firms and to defend the public sector from the neoliberal agenda. Despite Rawls's imprimatur, it is hard to see how the idea of a 'property-owning democracy' could make a major impact on the fundamentally unequal power relations embedded in capitalist economies.[3]

Turning more generally to the theme of democracy, White raises the question of whether we reveal an 'unresolved tension…between democratic norms…and values such as freedom of conscience and freedom of association', on account of our reluctance to use state power to democratise churches and other bodies. But our primary aim in Chapter 6 is to say something about what a participatory democracy would look like, not how to bring it about. We believe that the democratic ethos of a truly egalitarian society would be incompatible with hierarchically structured religions, and that therefore those structures would be a thing of the past. Just as many religions have already adapted to contemporary norms of human rights, gender equality and anti-racism, we would expect them to adapt to the democratic norms inherent in equality of condition. In such a society, the tensions White refers to would not arise.

[3] Rawls himself expresses agnosticism about such questions in John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 160.

Cillian McBride takes us to task on a different issue, the conflict between participatory and representative democracy. Unfortunately, he seriously misreads our position as one that would 'prefer to dispense with representative institutions altogether', a reading contradicted by our endorsement of the extensive use of elected representatives and the major revisions and clarifications we make to the delegate model of representation.[4] Since the normative premise on which his discussion is based, non-domination, is importantly distinct from the principles of equality of condition on which we base our own views, it would not be surprising if his conclusions should also differ. Yet what he says about strengthening the communicative relations between representatives and their constituents is strikingly similar to our position.

With respect to our treatment of the legal system, Joanne Conaghan welcomes our overall approach but suggests that we offer insufficient guidance on the concrete strategies necessary, in particular, for meeting the challenges thrown up by cross-cutting social divisions in the field of discrimination law. This is a fair comment, since most of the examples we discuss concern a single axis of subordination. But we think that our discussion of reasonable accommodation, participatory enforcement mechanisms and positive duties offers an employment equality model with the potential for dealing with cross-cutting divisions, because it involves a process in which the people experiencing intersecting oppressions have the right to participate. This is not to imagine that the tensions arising from intersecting axes of subordination can be easily resolved, but to insist that their resolution requires the full participation of relevant groups. As we point out in Chapter 7, a key requirement here is for representatives of these groups to be adequately resourced and empowered to exercise a real influence in decision-making.

[4] Baker, Lynch, Cantillon, and Walsh, *Equality: From Theory to Action*, pp. 99, 105-7.

In their discussions of education, both Harry Brighouse and Stuart White raise questions about our commitment to equal respect and recognition. Both of them worry that 'recognising diversity' implies an excessive willingness to accept the limited and possibly anti-egalitarian cultural assumptions that students bring into schools from their family backgrounds. Without wanting to minimise the issues involved, we nevertheless think that these readings of our work pay too little attention to our idea of 'critical interculturalism'; that is, to the aim of 'adopting, and acting upon, a critical, interactive approach to other people's beliefs, lifestyles, values and institutionalised practices – to their cultures in the broadest sense of the term – rather than simply allowing differences to coexist or merely tolerating them'.[5] It is this principle that casts doubt on the idea of a diverse set of monocultural schools and favours both integrated classes and a challenging pedagogy.

The second issue Brighouse raises is that, in existing capitalist economies, there is a potential conflict between our educational principles and equality of opportunity, because the equal respect and recognition we call for, and the education for care we endorse, are both likely to impede some students' chances of economic success: 'they make it less…likely that children who emanate from an already disadvantaged social group will succeed in the competition for income, wealth and interesting employment'. What this argument points to is the fact that, just as the educational system cannot single-handedly resolve the problem of unequal resources, it cannot resolve inequalities of respect and recognition in the context of a deeply unequal society. We therefore see Brighouse's point as an important contribution to the case for an egalitarianism that goes beyond equal opportunity and strives for equality of condition.

In conclusion, we welcome the seriousness with which our commentators have engaged with our work, even if we are not fully convinced of their criticisms. Part 2 of our book is

[5] Ibid., p. 160; see also p. 35.

intended to contribute to envisaging institutions and policies that promote equality of condition, but we are well aware that developing a vision of egalitarian societies and an egalitarian world is a collective task that requires attention and resources from a wider range of perspectives than our own.

At the same time, we would like to finish by reminding readers that there is more to our book than Part 2. In particular, we should like to think that the conceptual frameworks we propose in Part 1, and especially our attempt to incorporate love, care and solidarity as a dimension of equality and to identify the affective system as a context of egalitarian attention, are worthwhile contributions to egalitarian theory. And although we are acutely aware of the limitations of our discussion in Part 3 of strategies of egalitarian change, we would urge the readers of *Res Publica* to take these issues seriously. Philosophers must, of course, interpret the world. But the point really is to change it.

Baker, John, Kathleen Lynch, Sara Cantillon, and Judy Walsh. *Equality: From Theory to Action*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

Rawls, John. *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001.