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Equality and Other Values

John Baker

Equality is one of the central ideas in contemporary politics. But how does it relate to other human values, and particularly with the progressive values of the political left? I will argue that there is a close connection between one particular conception of equality, which I call ‘equality of condition’, and such values as human rights, diversity, liberation, freedom, solidarity and environmentalism. Overall, my argument is intended to support the claim that equality should be at the centre of our thinking about existing social institutions and how they should be changed.¹

‘Equality of condition’ is one of several possible conceptions of equality. It is, broadly speaking, the belief that people should be as equal as possible in relation to the central conditions of their lives. Equality of condition is not about trying to make inequalities fairer, or giving people a more equal opportunity to become unequal, but about ensuring that everyone has roughly equal prospects for a good life, that they are equally *enabled* and *empowered* in living their lives. To make this a little more specific, it helps to focus on five key ‘dimensions’ in which people can be equal or unequal in societies like ours. These five dimensions represent five major determinants of how well a person’s life goes, in relation to a wide range of conceptions of what a good life looks

¹ This article is part of continuing collaborative research in the Equality Studies Centre at UCD and in particular collaboration with Kathleen Lynch, Sara Cantillon and Judy Walsh. Because the ideas in this article rely on so many sources, I refer readers to our more academic publications for elaborations, acknowledgements and references and in particular to our forthcoming book, *Equality from Theory to Action*.

like, five types of condition that enable people to lead successful lives. Here is an extremely brief account of those dimensions of equality.

Respect and recognition. An important element of the idea of equal respect is the liberal idea that every individual is entitled to equal rights and privileges of citizenship in the country in which they live, and indeed that we are all, in some sense, citizens of the world. But equality of condition is also about appreciating or accepting differences rather than merely tolerating them. This doesn't mean that we have to refrain from criticizing other points of view. Members of dominant groups *do* have a particular obligation to try to understand the perspectives and commitments of members of other groups, and to open their own ideas to critical interrogation. But none of us has to give up the idea that some ideas and practices are unacceptable. What we do need is to engage in a critical dialogue with others. We could call this approach 'critical interculturalism'. Equality of respect and recognition also involves setting limits to inequalities of esteem.

Resources. There are many kinds of resources: not just income and wealth, but things like family connections, educational credentials, access to health services, environmental conditions and so on. Equality of condition is concerned with the whole range of these resources. No one could plausibly call for everyone to have exactly the same resources, because people have different needs and may take on different work burdens. Our overall aim should be to try to arrange the distribution of resources, first of all, to ensure that everyone's basic needs are met, and beyond that to enable people to have roughly equal prospects of well-being. Although the resulting distribution of resources would be unequal, it would be a lot more equal than what we have now.

Love, care and solidarity. The third dimension of equality of condition is love, care and solidarity. Equality in this dimension is about everyone having ample prospects for these vital relationships. Of course we cannot institutionally guarantee that everyone's needs for love, care and solidarity are met, but we can try to arrange societies in ways which make this more or less likely, by paying attention to how both paid and unpaid work are organized, how transportation networks are set up, how children's homes and other institutions are structured, how criminals are treated and so on. Our aim should again be an enabling one.

Power. Here the central aim of equality of condition is to reduce power inequalities as much as possible. To do this, we need to endorse traditional liberal civil and political rights, but with less of a commitment to property rights. We also have to support certain group-related rights, such as the right of groups to political representation or their right to education in minority languages. Finally, equality of power is about a more egalitarian, participatory politics and about the extension of democratic principles to all areas of society, particularly the economy and the family.

Working and learning. The fifth dimension of equality is working and learning. In all societies, work plays a very important role not just in access to resources, but in shaping relations of status, power, and love, care and solidarity. But work is also important in its own right, as a potential source of personal development and as a potential burden. We should consider all kinds of work, paid and unpaid, including the work done to sustain relations of love, care and solidarity. Equality in relation to work means that everyone should have a right to some form of potentially satisfying work, that there should be

limits to inequality in the burdens of work and that people should be compensated for unequal burdens when they occur.

Now working as equals has clear implications for learning, because it means making sure that everyone has access to the education and training necessary for satisfying work. But we shouldn't treat learning as no more than a preparation for work: it, too, is important for its own sake. So we should aim for ensuring that everyone has opportunities for engaging and satisfying learning – learning that develops themselves as people. And we should think in terms of the whole range of sites of learning, not just formal educational institutions.

From even this short exposition, it is clear that equality of condition is a complex idea. So right away it should be clear that the relationship between equality and other values has got to be complicated, depending on which elements of equality are being looked at. But this complexity also allows us to see that many of the traditional contrasts between equality and other values depend on a simplistic account of equality, and that a more realistic account leads to a different view of how values are related.

To begin with, a number of important values can be seen as aspects or elements of an egalitarian outlook. For example, the commitment to civil and political rights, the relief of poverty and non-discrimination – values enshrined in charters of human rights – are embedded in equality of condition, as are beliefs in (at least) the toleration of differences and (at least) liberal democracy. This overlap between equality and many of the dominant values of contemporary liberal democracies is unsurprising, since equality of condition is built on these values.

Because the conceptions of equality most prominent in liberal democracies have been concerned with equal opportunity and the distribution of resources, there has been a tendency for radical critics of liberalism to contrast equality with other ideas. For example, some authors have posed the question of ‘equality versus difference’, while others have contrasted equality with the idea of liberation. It should be clear from my account of equality of condition that these oppositions are misguided. Certainly, resource distribution plays a central role in equality of condition, but it is only one of its dimensions. What I said about equality of respect and recognition makes it clear that equality of condition involves accepting and valuing diversity. Nor should liberation be contrasted with equality, because liberation consists in the removal of unequal relationships of domination and oppression and is therefore the central concept in equality of power.

In the case of some other values, the connection to equality is more complicated but still important. It arises out of the fact that any equality is an equality *of something* – income, wealth, power, respect, status and so on. We care about these equalities and their corresponding inequalities because the things or relationships they refer to matter to us: they are themselves of value. Thus, for virtually anything of value, whether it is freedom, love or a decent environment, it is possible to ask whether these goods should be available to everyone equally or just to a privileged few. Will we have equal freedom or will some people have much more freedom than others? Will everyone have prospects of love and care or will some be excluded? Will we work to conserve and improve everyone’s environment or neglect the poor? Because these values are important,

egalitarians have always asked these questions and must continue to do so. It follows that any simple contrast *between* equality and these other values fails to think through the basic logic of the idea of equality. On the contrary, because principles of equality are always *about* other values, we must assert them at the same time as we assert the claims of equality.

Of course, opponents of equality may not care whether people are equally prosperous or have equal access to a healthy environment. What they cannot do is pretend that this isn't an issue, that the ideas of prosperity or the environment can be set out as social objectives without paying attention to how their benefits are distributed among the population.

Since questions of equality and inequality arise in principle for any human good, it might well be asked why there are not an indefinite number of dimensions of equality, each concerned with something of value. My answer is that the dimensions of equality are meant to capture as well as possible the types of equality and inequality that affect most strongly people's prospects for achieving whatever it is that they value, rather than being a list of these valuable things themselves. To the extent that they succeed in doing this, they offer a relatively complete account of equality of condition. But I do not claim that they are in principle complete, or that it does not make sense in specific contexts to focus on inequalities that are only implicit in the five dimensions I have set out. So, for example, it is perfectly legitimate to study – and to deplore – inequalities in the health and mortality rates of different social classes. But these inequalities are rooted in inequalities

of work, resources, power, status and care. That is why the five-dimensional framework focuses on these latter inequalities and not on the various conditions they produce.

One of the most widely discussed questions is whether equality is compatible with freedom. Since freedom (or liberty, which I use synonymously) is at least as complicated and disputable a concept as equality, I could not possibly give a comprehensive account of the relationship between freedom and equality here. But what I would like to suggest is that there is a very intimate connection between these two ideas. It is not, as with other human goods, a question of freedom being one possible dimension of equality, but rather that each of the dimensions of equality is related to a particular set of freedoms. Yet, as with other goods, the idea of equality raises the question of whether freedom will be equally or unequally shared.

This point is particularly obvious in relation to equality of power. We have already seen how this dimension of equality is centrally concerned with the classic civil and political rights that constitute the fundamental freedoms of liberal democratic societies.

There is obviously no question of a conflict between equality and these freedoms.

Another aspect of equality of power is the idea of democracy. This connects to a rather different conception of freedom, namely self-rule or autonomy, and the equal freedom of citizens to make their own collective decisions rather than to defer to the powerful. As I have already mentioned, equality of power is also closely related to liberation, a third conception of freedom.

Turning to another dimension of equality, it is sometimes thought that the principle of equality of resources is directly contrary to freedom. Since everyone agrees that an

unregulated (*'laissez-faire'*) market economy will produce gross disparities of income and wealth, it appears that equality of resources requires constant interference with people's economic freedom. However, this appearance is deceptive. The first thing to notice is that a so-called 'unregulated' economy is itself a structure of limited freedom, because its central characteristic is private property. Private property only exists within a legal system which defines the rights of owners and restricts those of non-owners. It is the force of law, after all, which prevents a poor person from leaving a shop with the same goods as a rich person and excludes most employees from controlling the companies they work for. Since such an economy does indeed generate gross inequalities of wealth and income, it follows that such an economy creates gross inequalities of freedom, and that anyone interested in equal freedom has to endorse a different kind of economy, with a different system of economic rights. Such an economy would give some people less freedom than they might have had as successes in a *laissez-faire* economy, but it would give more freedom to everyone else.

The other dimensions of equality can also be easily construed in terms of freedom. Equality of respect and recognition is about the freedom of people to live their lives unimpeded by the depreciation and disdain that subordinate groups are burdened with in an unequal society. Equality of love, care and solidarity is about the freedom of everyone to give and receive care and to engage in relationships of love and solidarity, a freedom that is severely constricted for some people in unequal societies. Equality of working and learning is about enabling people to develop their capacities and to engage in satisfying

and worthwhile activities. This expansion of their real options clearly enhances their freedom to live a life of their choosing.

As I have emphasised, the point of equality of condition is not to prescribe a way of life for people but to open up to everyone the prospect of a good life by enabling them to make real choices among alternatives of similar worth. We could even call it equality of real freedom, but for the burden of having to distinguish this view from others that are similar. Of course, freedom is a very open concept and for this reason equality is necessarily contrary to certain types of freedom, e.g. the freedom of the powerful to oppress the weak. But if we are interested in the idea of *equal* freedom, then there is a strong case for thinking that freedom and equality go hand in hand.

The classic principles of the French Revolution were liberty, equality and fraternity. How does equality related to the third member of that triad? The word 'fraternity' has gone out of fashion because of its somewhat sexist connotations; it is more common nowadays for people to use the idea of solidarity. In my account of equality of love, care and solidarity, I used the term 'solidarity' to refer to a relationship of mutual concern and support. Solidarity in this sense stands in strong contrast to the ideology of self-interest and individualism fostered by capitalist social relations. I take it as obvious that people in general have a basic need for solidarity relationships and that these relationships help to enable them to live successful lives. That is why solidarity is included in the third dimension of equality. But I would also suggest that solidarity is an important support for the other dimensions of equality, because people who feel solidarity with each other are more likely to be willing to endorse egalitarian principles which give the same weight to

the needs and interests of others as to their own. That kind of mutual concern makes it easier for people to be willing to accept their fair share of resources, to cooperate in developing egalitarian arrangements for working and learning, and to renounce the opportunity to wield power over others. So I see a deep and natural connection between the ideas of solidarity and equality.

One of the most common complaints against egalitarianism has been that it implies a society in which everyone is the same and differences are suppressed. As discussed above, equality of condition involves a very different stance: neither a cultural imperialism which treats one set of values as the right ones nor a cultural relativism which treats all sets of values as equally valid. The question that this view raises is whether such an emphasis on diversity is compatible with the value of solidarity. Although it is easy enough to see that the acceptance of group difference allows for solidarity within groups, it is harder to see how we can establish and maintain solidarity between groups with very different cultures and interests. Surveying the bitter ethnic conflicts of the contemporary world, it seems hard to assert that differences between groups can be combined with solidarity among them.

My response to this problem operates at three levels. First, it relies on recognising the common humanity of members of every social group. As human beings, we do have the capacity to empathise with and care for other human beings, regardless of our differences. Secondly, it notes that every society has many overlapping social groups with cross-cutting affiliations. People who are divided from each other by disability or sexuality may be united by class or gender. Thirdly, it stresses the ways in which different social groups

can retain their distinctive commitments while endorsing a shared egalitarian conception of justice, a conception which itself recognises and values diversity. Of course, developing such a consensus on egalitarian principles of justice is a difficult practical challenge in achieving ideological change, but there is no reason to dismiss it as impossible. Together, these points support the idea that solidarity is perfectly compatible with accepting diversity: that people can and often do form relationships of solidarity with others whom they recognise as different from themselves, and that equality of condition therefore neither implies nor presupposes assimilation and uniformity.

Let us turn, finally, to the question of how equality relates to the environmental movement. That movement has posed one of the strongest contemporary challenges to the dominant values of western societies. Criticising the idea of human beings as separate from nature and aspiring to be its masters, the movement has reasserted the view of many indigenous cultures that we are part of nature and need to act in harmony with the other inhabitants of our planet. Not only is it against the interests of our own species to pillage the earth's resources, but it fails to acknowledge that human interests are not the only interests concerned. The egalitarian tradition is not immune from these criticisms, since its proponents have typically shared the dominant western belief in economic growth and in conquering the natural world. Is there, then, an intrinsic conflict between environmentalism and equality?

To answer this question, it helps to make use of the contrast drawn by green political theorists between 'deep' and 'shallow' ecology. At one end of the scale, deep ecologists assert the interests of all living things, and see those of human beings as a tiny fraction of

the whole. At the other end, shallow or 'anthropocentric' ecologists base their defence of environmental values on the interests of human beings themselves: for humanity's own sake, rare species need to be preserved, resources conserved, pollution minimised and so on. At the same time, shallow ecologists also maintain that we need to re-examine our understanding of our own interests, challenging the dominant view of the good life as one of expanding consumption and pointing to other sources of fulfilment, because consumerism is a recipe for global disaster.

It seems clear enough that this shallow ecology is consistent with egalitarianism, and indeed that the two views need to be combined. One of the things egalitarians must take on board, as I have tried to do in my account of equal resources, is that environmental factors are themselves resources that have a major impact on people's well-being.

Egalitarians also need to focus on the obvious truths that the earth's resources are limited and that, regardless of increases in productivity, we cannot reasonably expect an endless increase in consumption. These truisms undermine one of the most persuasive objections to economic redistribution, namely that growth improves the living standards of the worst off anyway. If there are limits to growth, then there are limits to the maxim that 'a rising tide lifts all boats' and equality of condition becomes all the more important.

On the other side of the coin, environmentalists need to pay attention to how the costs and benefits of environmental policies are distributed. As the environmental justice movement has shown, the effects of environmental degradation are not equally felt. Marginalised and subordinate groups are likely to be at the receiving end of pollution, hazardous production and global warming. Privileged groups are in a much better

position to escape these effects. The policies necessary for reversing environmental damage also have their costs and benefits. The reduction in the use of fossil fuels, for example, has to be based on the principle of an equal entitlement to sources of energy.

It is less certain that egalitarianism is consistent with the various forms of deep ecology, because they involve such a radical redrawing of the moral universe. If egalitarians want to prioritise *human* needs, this must surely conflict in some cases with the needs of other living creatures, even if, as shallow ecologists maintain, the conflict is much less pervasive than is often assumed. The key issue here is the relationship between egalitarianism and the interests of non-human animals, sometimes captured by the idea of 'animal rights'. A number of arguments for human equality are relevant to other animals, whether these are posed in terms of concern for the well-being of other sentient creatures or more narrowly in terms of key capacities for choice and communication. To the extent that these arguments succeed, they represent an extension of egalitarianism rather than a conflict between it and environmental values. I therefore conclude that egalitarianism and environmentalism are essentially compatible outlooks, with the qualification that a conflict is more likely at the deep ecology end of the spectrum. This affinity between the two outlooks is expressed globally by the increasing cooperation between social justice and environmental movements.

In this article, I have argued that many important human values can be related to equality of condition either as aspects of equality itself or as values to which the idea of equality can be applied. In particular, I have suggested that there are important connections between equality, freedom, solidarity and environmental values. I hope to

have indicated how it is possible to have a consistent set of beliefs in which equality is the central and organising principle.

Equality is not the only value. As I have indicated, that does not even make sense. But it is more than just one value among many. It is a tool for making coherent connections between values and thereby constructing one or more coherent sets of principles for a good society. Such principles can be used to criticise existing social institutions and systems and to suggest ways to improve or replace them. In my view, that is the task – both intellectual and political – to which we should be dedicated.

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