

In All Fairness: Equality, Liberty and the Quest for Human Dignity

Robert M. Whaples, Michael C. Munger and Christopher J. Coyne (eds). 2019. Oakland, CA: Independent Institute. ISBN: 9781598133318. \$26.95 (hardcover).

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Years ago, a professor acquaintance of mine shared the following thought experiment during an online discussion about income inequality:

Most students in my classes are for higher marginal taxation on the rich (defined as the dollar amount of people who have a wee bit more than them).

I propose centrally planned sorting by either IQ or socio-economic status (noting some studies that show how IQ might have a hereditary component and how IQ might be related to long-term income potential). I also note that we tend to marry people who are educationally and socially close to us (e.g., people meet at Harvard or in the same upscale neighborhood bars). Some of us use mail order catalogues, but we usually get a box on education to check.

Students freak out. First, they say that this has never been done. Then I note how arranged marriages are not an uncommon fixture in history. Then they say it isn't possible because of data concerns, and I remind them about all those tests they took in 3rd, 7th and 11th grade and their "permanent record," not to mention all the income data the IRS has on their parents.

Then they squeal that this isn't right because it limits their freedom to do what they want. And then I say, "Oh, so now you're worried about centrally planned limits on freedom, eh?"

While this thought experiment may seem hyperbolic, for me it illuminates several important issues surrounding the income inequality debate: How much is inequality driven simply by natural endowments? What level of inequality is acceptable? What lines are we willing to cross to equalize outcomes? How are limits on certain freedoms justified compared to limits on other types of freedoms? These kinds of issues are addressed in great detail in the timely volume *In All Fairness: Equality, Liberty and the Quest for Human Dignity* from the Independent Institute.

The book's content is organized into three parts: (1) Problems with the Modern Philosophy of Egalitarianism, (2) The Historical

Development of Egalitarian Ideas, and (3) Egalitarianism, Economic Performance, and the Laws of Economics. As the part titles imply, this volume casts a wide net of philosophical, historical, and empirical arguments regarding the nature of equality. The chapters in Part 1 attempt to break down some of the unexamined assumptions and implications of modern egalitarian thought. Part 2 engages in a bit of intellectual history in order to trace the development and—in the view of the authors—the derailment of egalitarian ideals. Finally, Part 3, which is the most empirically based of the three, investigates various areas of import such as absolute poverty, taxation, living standards, and the like. Many of these issues go to the heart of the inequality debate and its relation (or lack thereof) to human well-being.

Before discussing some of the common themes and specific arguments throughout the chapters, it is worth highlighting the somewhat unexpected theological elements of the book. In the introduction, Robert Whaples provides the answers to an inquiry he posed to some of his colleagues at Wake Forest University: What is the *purpose* of inequality? The selected faculty ranged from biologists to sociologists to religion scholars, with the latter offering answers of particular interest to readers of this journal. One religion scholar answered that inequality is “a *symptom* of injustice” and a “red flag” in the Jewish-Christian prophetic tradition. However, a Thomist philosopher placed inequality at the feet of God, pointing to the distinctions between things and the “degrees of goodness, even lesser goods” within Creation (p. 9). Whaples even concludes his introduction with C. S. Lewis’s warning about the potential for *equality* and *democracy* to be employed as covers for envy. These seemingly contradictory viewpoints actually open the door for fruitful theological and ethical discussions about good/bad, acceptable/unacceptable forms of inequality (a topic explored in Chapter 17).

In Chapter 6, P. J. Hill takes a more explicit theological route by tracing the religious origins of human dignity and equality. These metaphysical concepts had their beginnings “in early Jewish history and then in Christian anthropology,” gradually “work[ing their] way into philosophical and political thinking before finally becoming fully ingrained in modern thought” (p. 70). “If all humans are bearers of the image of the omniscient, omnipotent God of the universe,” writes Hill, “then social and political equality are logical necessities of that concept” (p. 71). Relying largely on the work of Larry Siedentop (2014), Hill concludes

that modern egalitarians “are heirs to a long process of intellectual and cultural evolution” whose metaphysical foundations were laid by the Jewish and Christian belief that “all humans are bearers of God’s image” (p. 79). In Chapter 9, William Watkins states it even more bluntly:

Undoubtedly, Moses’s teaching in Genesis 1:24 that man is made in the image of God forms the basis for American adherence to equality before the law. As image-bearers, each individual has an intrinsic value. This is especially so when ... we remember that ‘God shows no partiality’ and accepts men from all nations who come in the name of Christ. (p. 105)

For Christians committed to the doctrine of humans possessing the *imago dei*, the question becomes about how our institutions can hold this image sacred; how best to systematically represent and respect the divine dignity of every human. One specific idea emerges as foundational to the multiple arguments throughout *In All Fairness*: respect for the individual as a moral agent and, consequently, respect for their choices. The notion of respect for individual choice may seem a cliché at this point. However, as Adam Martin argues in the first chapter, individuals “can instantiate moral principles appropriately only when they are free to act on their beliefs about their particular circumstances” (p. 13). This includes the Christian.

Similar to the “red flag” view of the Hebrew prophets, Aeon Skoble, in Chapter 4, explains that “focus[ing] on wealth inequality and not on legal inequality” can lead to misdiagnosis. “The true injustice is that [people] are not treated as equals by the political/legal order. [The] wealth disparity is a symptom, not a cause, of the more fundamental inequality” (p. 52). For Skoble, “The complaint that the rich have an undue influence over political favors is legitimate, but it is clear that the more effective solution would be the abolition of those favors” (p. 55). This requires a focus on negative rights over positive rights and a “respect for consensual contractual arrangements” (p. 53). However, even with special privileges removed, these consensual contractual arrangements can very well lead to unequal outcomes. However, James Otteson (Chapter 2) argues that our ultimate goal should be “an egalitarianism of respect.” We must “respect the choices people make—even when those choices lead to unequal outcomes or to consequences that the choosers did not want” (p. 35). All “are equal moral agents and thus deserve to have their

choices respected as much as anyone else's choices" (p. 30). As Michael Munger (Chapter 3) puts it: "how can an unjust *aggregate* result come from many *individually just* transactions? And if we don't allow trade, aren't we harming those who are least well-off?" (p. 44). This indicates that in many instances, attempting to narrow inequality may actually end up negating or suppressing the choices of millions of people:

The advantage of markets is that they make each consumer the boss of his or her consumption decisions, with an ability to use subjective judgments to decide whether he or she is 'better off' ... Profits are the result of taking a resource out of one use and redirecting it toward an alternative use that consumers prefer. (p. 47)

These insights illuminate the point made by Jeremy Jackson and Jeffrey Palm in Chapter 5, that many modern egalitarians have shifted from a "commitment to relational equality" to a sole focus on "material equality" (p. 57).

I have obviously glossed over some of the particulars of these authors' different philosophical arguments for the purpose of highlighting their commonalities. A potential weakness of these arguments from the Christian perspective would be the assumption of the intrinsic good of mere choice. Theologians such as David B. Hart (2009) have noted critically:

For us [moderns], it is choice itself, and not what we choose, that is the first good, and this applies not only to such matters as what we shall purchase or how we shall live. In even our gravest political and ethical debates ... 'choice' is a principle not only frequently invoked, by one side or by both, but often seeming to exercise an almost mystical supremacy over all other concerns. (p.22)

In addition, there will always be debates about *what* choices should be permitted. Nonetheless, establishing a general institutional and societal respect for the choices of all not only treats others as capable, moral agents, but also provides the protected space for Christians to fulfill Jesus' admonition: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16, *KJV*).

The final section of the book will likely be the most interesting for economists. If readers are unimpressed by the more philosophical

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arguments of the first two-thirds of the book, then the data breakdowns of the last third may offer something more tantalizing. Case in point, Art Carden, Sarah Estelle, and Anne Bradley (Chapter 12) remind readers that we should focus more on poverty and less on inequality. Caring for the poor and needy is one of the most prominent and consistent themes throughout the biblical canon. The fact that global markets and industrialization have brought absolute poverty to its lowest levels in human history should catch the attention of Christian economists. Talk of inequality within developed nations is ultimately talk of inequality between the global rich. Ben O'Neill (Chapter 14) highlights the convergence that occurs due to economic growth:

Growth causes an increasing shift to relative abundance of exchangeable goods, and the diminishing marginal returns for this class of goods mean that real inequality gets smaller and smaller. Most importantly, this equalizing phenomenon occurs *even when the distribution of monetary wealth remains unequal*. (p. 182)

Similarly, Edward Stringham (Chapter 16) explains:

one hundred years ago the majority of American households lacked electricity, indoor plumbing, a stove, or a refrigerator, whereas today pretty much everyone has all of these amenities. If one measures equality as access to these particular technologies, then we have much more equality than ever, even if relative income or wealth has diverged greatly. (p. 204)

Vincent Geloso and Steven Horwitz (Chapter 17) also dive into the difficulties of accurately measuring inequality, from Consumer Price Index (CPI) biases to income vs. consumption measurements. While a supporter of modern egalitarianism may not find all these arguments convincing, the section nonetheless presents data that must be wrestled with before making claims about, or policy recommendations to address, inequality.

In All Fairness certainly has its biases. As one might guess from the publisher alone (a libertarian think tank), the authors take a predominantly classical liberal approach to the matter of equality. However, it is a strong representation of this approach. Critics and supporters alike will benefit from serious engagement with the data and arguments presented by the various authors. And Christians may find new means of limiting the corrupt power of “the kingdoms of the world” (Matthew 4:8 NIV).

References

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