



# Review of Equalities by Douglas Rae

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## BOOK REVIEWS

Rae, Douglas, et al. *Equalities*.

Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981. Pp. xii + 210. \$19.50 (cloth).

Defenders of equality have to face two types of challenges. One lot comes from ideals other than equality, the other from other ideals of equality. It is fair to say that the former challenge has received more attention than the latter has. The claims of equality have been pitched against the claims of such diverse ideals as liberty, efficiency, fairness, order, rights, freedom, and autonomy. In contrast, Douglas Rae and his collaborators (D. Yates, J. Hochschild, J. Morone, and C. Fessler) are primarily concerned, in this illuminating and stimulating monograph, with the latter, namely, the challenge to each ideal of equality from other ideals of equality.

Rae is keen to explain that, despite taking "the ideal of equality seriously enough to write a book about it," no "unilateral endorsement" of equality is intended (p. 19). But he notes that "everywhere one hears praise for the idea of equality" (p. 2), and he does see equality as "the most powerful ideal of our time" (p. 19). The motivation for Rae's study comes out most sharply in the very last sentences of the text: "Intellect resists equality by counterposing rival ideas such as efficiency, freedom, and order. Actuality is smarter, for it chooses the one idea that is more powerful than order or efficiency or freedom in resisting equality. That idea is, of course, equality itself" (p. 150).

"We are always confronted," says Rae, "with more than one practical meaning for equality and equality itself cannot provide a basis for choosing among them." The book is devoted to exploring various meanings of equality—their interrelations, their contradictions, and their respective claims. There is also an ambitious attempt—largely successful—to develop a "structural grammar of equality" (p. 18). No one interested in examining the ideal of equality can afford to ignore the clarification and the understanding that Rae has offered in this slender volume.

"Equality," argues Rae, "splits itself into many distinct notions, each an element in its grammar." He analyzes each of these notions with care, contrasting their contents and comparing their claims. The notions are also classified in terms of their characteristics. "Equality's subject may be individual-regarding, bloc-regarding, or segmental; its domain may be straightforward, marginal, or global; the idea of equality may be applied directly (equal results) or may be a version of equal opportunity (which in turn may equate means or prospects); equality may be based on uniform lots or on lots equally accommodating differences; it may be absolute or relative (and, if relative, based on any of several distinct notions of relative equality). There are, moreover, many subordinate points of structural differentiation, such as the distinction between inclusive and exclusive subjects, or between the two strategies for global equality—compensatory inequality and redistribution of domains" (pp. 132–33). These differences are worth studying not merely to understand better what people claim when they demand equality but also to explain the acceptability of the ideal of "equality" in widely different and mutually antagonistic circles. Equality, Rae notes, has "turned from one thing into many things and turned from something frightening to rich men into something that they unofficially endorse" (p. vii).

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Given this plural conception of equality, the question is bound to arise whether the idea of equality is not completely empty. (For some interesting arguments in favor of that view, see Peter Westen, "The Empty Idea of Equality," *Harvard Law Review* 95 [1982]: 537–96.) Rae evidently does not think so. Indeed, one of the uses of the "grammar of equality" outlined by Rae is precisely to reject that suggestion, though he does not—somewhat unfortunately (in my judgment)—pose the question in quite that form.

Each notion of equality, Rae's analysis shows, has its own discipline. They are not completely pliable. Nor are they, typically, just ad hoc constructions devised to support whatever a person wishes to support using the language of equality. The restrictions relate to the rationale of each of the concepts of equality discussed by Rae, and this is where his approach is most different from other works on the plurality of egalitarian ideals. (Compare Westen, p. 596: "Equality will cease to mystify—and cease to skew moral and political discourse—when people come to realize that it is an empty form having no substantive content of its own. That will occur as soon as people realize that every moral and legal argument can be framed in the form of an argument for equality.") The rules of the "grammar of equality," explored by Rae, are not really so loose. Rae's approach involves an explicit rejection, on the one hand, of the romanticism of "the" idea of equality and an implicit denial, on the other, of the skeptical belief that equality stands for "just nothing."

The question that does not get adequately addressed, in my judgment, is one about the genesis of the plurality of egalitarian notions. Rae makes a good case for arguing that "the question is not 'Whether equality?' but 'Which equality?'" (p. 19). But there is a further question, to wit, *Why* so many different notions of equality? Rae deals with this question only indirectly and in passing. But the question may deserve more attention than that. Even our assessment of different demands of different notions of equality may well be affected by our understanding of the basic sources of this plurality.

I would argue that one important source of the plurality of the idea of equality is a more foundational plurality, namely, that of the notion of "advantage." A person's advantage can be seen in many radically different ways—in terms, respectively, of achievements or opportunities, absolutes or relatives, and using one or more of several different notions of the goodness of a person's state, for example, well-being, freedom, opulence, and need fulfillment. While these different ways of seeing personal (and group) advantages are obviously not independent of each other, neither are they congruent.

Does it matter whether the plurality is traced to the idea of advantage or seen just in terms of the conceptualization of equality itself? For some purposes it may not matter much, or indeed at all. But one consequence of relating the genesis of plural equality to plural notions of advantage is that we would expect a similar plurality in other ideas that too derive from—or depend on—the metric of advantage.

To take a simple example, the content of the notion of *efficiency* in terms of human achievements or predicaments (that the situation is such that no one can be made more advantaged without cutting into the advantages of someone else) must depend on how advantage is seen. If advantage is seen in absolute terms and identified with, say, utility, that notion of efficiency immediately becomes the concept of Pareto optimality. But corresponding to other notions of advantage (involving opulence, freedom, etc.), we shall have other notions of efficiency.

The contrast between aggregative considerations (how large the total?) and distributive ones (how equally distributed?) can be combined with quite different ways of judging advantage. And corresponding to Rae's plural equalities there are, respectively, plural efficiencies, plural affluences, and plural social aggregates. It is, thus, arguable that Rae could have gone further—and in some ways, perhaps, even deeper—in tracing the sources of plurality of equalities, which he explores with such clarity in his "grammar of equality." But we must not grumble. In providing an illuminating and most insightful analysis of plural equalities, Douglas Rae has, in any case, put us greatly in his debt.

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Scheffler, Samuel. *The Rejection of Consequentialism: A Philosophical Investigation of the Considerations Underlying Rival Moral Conceptions*.  
Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982. Pp. ix + 133. \$12.95 (cloth); \$9.95 (paper).

Samuel Scheffler holds that the good of an individual is determined from her unique "personal point of view." By contrast, he says, consequentialism assumes that there is a distinct, "impersonal" point of view for determining "overall good." Scheffler limits his attention to act consequentialism, which holds that we must always secure as much overall good as possible—that any failure to do so, on any occasion, is morally wrong.

Scheffler believes that this theory is fundamentally flawed, though his reasoning suggests only that some qualifications on it are needed. He does not marshal arguments against consequentialism. His method is to see what plausible rationales could underlie established lines of criticism. He suggests that consequentialism should be qualified by an "agent-centered prerogative" (ACP), which permits one (sometimes) to pursue one's own concerns rather than promote overall good. How often, how uniformly, indeed on what precise basis the mandates of act consequentialism should be relaxed is left unsettled: Scheffler is concerned only with the general point of and need for an ACP. He also argues that a much more radical departure from consequentialism is unnecessary: this would be an "agent-centered restriction" (ACR), which would require (and not merely permit) one (sometimes) not to maximize overall good. The rationale for an ACP, Scheffler holds, does not require an ACR, and he finds no plausible alternative rationale for the more radical restriction.

Scheffler's study is a judicious, closely reasoned, cautious, but nonetheless imaginative and illuminating analysis of familiar objections to consequentialism. If his argument is admittedly inconclusive and his results admittedly somewhat vague, he can still be credited, I believe, with significantly raising the level of theoretical ethics.

Although Scheffler tells us (p. vi) that he has long regarded utilitarianism as "thoroughly abhorrent," he treats consequentialism, the genus of utilitarianism, as initially quite plausible. His strategy requires that he explain its rationale, but what he says amounts to this: once we accept the idea of overall good, we are led to act consequentialism because the most rational way of taking that idea into account is expressed in the notion that each of us is morally required to maximize overall good whenever we do anything (p. 123).