

Review – Equality Renewed: Justice, Flourishing and the Egalitarian Ideal

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As one of the dominant theories in political philosophy, utilitarianism claims that a policy should aim at maximization of total social welfare. However, it turned sharply to equality with the publication of Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* in 1971. Now, the major contemporary theories of justice all share these egalitarian ideas, valuing the equality of everyone. Rawls criticized utilitarianism for ignoring the problem of inequality in the distribution of welfare and proposed the difference principle to ensure justice for the worse-off. But a society formed on the liberty principle and the difference principle, and which is built on the bases of the original position and the veil of ignorance, excludes those who are mentally disadvantaged. Sen switched the point of emphasis here by focusing on "equality of what". He critiqued three types of equality: utilitarian equality, total utility equality, and Rawlsian equality in the Tanner lecture, and proposed his model of "basic capability equality" to "shift attention from goods to what goods do to human beings" (Sen 1980, 218–219), and attended to how capability achieves valuable functionings. Meanwhile, Cohen critiqued Sen's explanation of capability for giving too much weight to freedom, which is "concerned with what one CAN do and 'with what one can DO'" (qtd. Nussbaum and Sen 1993, 26). Cohen argued, in egalitarian politics there is no "genuine choice" as such that needs to exert the value of capability for egalitarianism, insofar as equality has nothing to do with capability. Cohen argued that egalitarianism is about building a society, in which "no serious inequality obtains when everyone has everything she needs, even if she did not have to lift a finger to get it" (28), and that is what "equality of access to advantage" is aiming at.

Drawing on this debate on egalitarianism, Christine Sypnowich proposes her new approach to equality in *Equality Renewed: Justice, Flourishing and the Egalitarian Ideal*.

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-tarian Ideal by combining the theories of Sen and Cohen. She argues that equality should be understood in terms of enabling everyone to have a good life. Where Sen's "equality of capability" focuses on what a person can do and Cohen's "equality of access to advantage" concentrates on what the community provides, Sypnowich's "equality of flourishing" draws on both these views. She believes that everyone has an equal right to enjoy a flourishing life. What kind of life can be counted as a flourishing life? Sypnowich answers that three criteria should be satisfied: one should have a life that includes the ability to choose how to live; involves objectively worthwhile pursuits; and grants personal contentment (Sypnowich 2017, 140–141). She establishes thresholds for flourishing, starting with a basic flourishing level that everyone should attain. If a person's condition does not reach this basic level of flourishing, the community should provide sufficient resources to help him or her achieve it, and thus it is reasonable to distribute resources more to the disadvantaged, to some extent. After that, equality will give way to excellence, and that's why Sypnowich also calls her account "egalitarian perfectionism" (132). In a word, equality has priority until everyone can achieve a basic level of flourishing, and after that, equality may be compromised by instances of excellence. Is the basic level of flourishing constant? Sypnowich says no, arguing that the basic level of flourishing is flexible. It is positively correlated with the wellbeing of the majority of people within a state, and the goal of her account of human flourishing is to maximize flourishing as well as to equalize it by way of a staggered threshold approach. This approach "seeks an ambitious level of equal flourishing by means of improving flourishing, as much as is possible, at a base level and then raising it in stages, to ensure that the flourishing of the worst off is constantly improved" (146).

This book covers almost all topics within political philosophy, including race, gender, neutrality, multiculturalism, autonomy, global justice, and cosmopolitanism. Sypnowich demonstrates the advantages of her flourishing approach in addressing these themes.

Equality Renewed is made up of three parts: challenges to equality, liberal revisionism, and equality and living well. Part I and part II correspond to the two major challenges to egalitarianism: the problem of difference and the neutralism of liberal political thought, respectively. In Part III, Sypnowich mainly elucidates her new approach to equality and extends it into the realm of global justice. In Part I, Sypnowich maintains that "adherents to the idea of difference may abhor such a world, but they deploy typologies and distinctions based on culture, race, gender, or language that suggest essentialism about difference" (36). She argues that although "our invocations of difference always risk essentialism" (26), "the politics of difference" should not be reduced to essentialism. Cultural recognition, color con-

sciousness, deconstruction of race, and sexual difference make us pay attention to people who appear different, but the main point is to tell us that race and gender do not have inherent and unchangeable attributes for our unique identities; they are nonessential. We are free to choose these identities, either changing them or giving them up, because races and genders are only differences, not permanent and immutable identities. Thus, the relationship between difference and commonality is compatible; they can coexist. However, it is worth noting that Sypnowich does not underestimate the importance of highlighting differences, neither with regard to race nor gender. The point she wants to emphasize is that if we really understand differences, we will not stereotype them always as being harbingers of inequality and we will find that differences sometimes have nothing to do with inequality at all. Thus, she says that “social justice is not best pursued by the politics of difference or identity. Rather, what is required is a form of egalitarianism that focuses on human flourishing beyond the confines of cultural identity, and that combines a pluralistic vision of the good with a universalist commitment to equality” (16).

The concepts of neutrality and multiculturalism provide two different ways to deal with difference in Part II. Liberalism deals with the problem of difference posed by neutrality. In Chapter 4, Sypnowich explores Rawls’ theoretical hypothesis where reasonable and rational persons have the capacity to form, pursue, and revise a conception of the good, have the capacity to develop a sense of justice, and cooperate to design a social structure to ensure justice. Yet, this classification of reasonable and rational persons does not properly take into account children and mentally disabled adults. While the conception of justice that these reasonable and rational persons pursue may be based on reason, might remain a plausible concept. Sypnowich moves on to examining the problems of neutrality in terms of the vocabulary of “neutrality” itself (which is a subject-less perspective without one’s own identity, values or beliefs), the depth of neutrality (it seems that the neutrality upon which Rawls insisted conflicts with the morally substantive reasons for political liberalism), the source and extent of neutrality (because of Rawls’ arbitrary division between the political and the comprehensive, several political practical issues are excluded from politics). In sum, Sypnowich believes that Rawls’ emphasis on neutrality does not successfully address differences. Multiculturalists take the approach of accommodating difference by means of policies of multiculturalism, as espoused by Will Kymlicka. This mean not being prejudiced against cultures, allowing citizens’ freedom to choose their culture, but also incorporating special arrangements to protect cultures (91). Kymlicka insists we protect minority cultures in response to cultural oppression—because states can remedy injustice and inequality without undermining neutrality— and then ensure equal

autonomy for citizens to choose their way of lives and revise their choices. Sypnowich powerfully argues that “minority cultural rights protect the conditions for choice making in a minority culture, but they also inhibit the kinds of choices individuals may make” (Sypnowich 2017, 97). Furthermore, Kymlicka’s position seems to entail that every culture has an equal right to existence, so as to allow individuals to have sufficient choices in exercising their freedom and autonomy. However, it is worth noting that the disappearance of a culture does not mean that the culture was oppressed or that it disappeared due to oppression.

Can egalitarians give a better answer than liberalism when it comes to difference? Sypnowich answers “absolutely”. She gives the explanation about her new approach in Part III. In Chapter 6, Sypnowich responds with three challenges concerning the aim of material equality: levelling down, the problem of talent, and the matter of partiality (113). She argues that the flourishing approach calls for redistribution for the sake of everyone’s wellbeing rather than for the sake of achieving strict equality, basing this, however, on “the fact that ‘those with less have too little’” (115). She also embraces talents, which are closely related to human diversity and flourishing, where what she wants to do is to separate the relation between talent inequality and material inequality, rather than eliminating talent entirely (122). A wellbeing approach means living in a society with an egalitarian ethos, such that good relationships with families are to be “encouraged and fostered, within an egalitarian institutional context that assures us that such goods can be pursued guilt-free” (125). Sypnowich believes that “objectively worthwhile pursuits, autonomy, and contentment” (170) are indispensable constituents of flourishing. According to her approach, there are several things that we must keep in mind. Firstly, human flourishing is neither homogeneous nor uniform, but varies with individuals, namely, as different persons have different kinds of flourishing. Equality of human flourishing does not mean that everyone should achieve at the same level, “wellbeing takes diverse” (157). Secondly, there is no absolute tension between excellence and equality other than the basic threshold that flourishing should be equal, and where the relationship of them is fluctuating. Egalitarian perfectionism “focuses on flourishing as what we seek to make more equal, and thus gives up on maximizing excellence if this sacrifices some for others. However, so long as society meets a high threshold of equal flourishing, the position is prepared to moderate equality in order to provide opportunities for excellence” (144). But where is the threshold? Actually, there is no simple threshold, but a staggered threshold “to ensure that the flourishing of the worst off is constantly improved” (146). Thirdly, a flourishing society also has drawbacks, for example, the problem of individual contributions and adaptive preferences (146–150). Finally, living a good life is better than having the ability and freedom to choose a

good life, because choices made freely may be detrimental to flourishing, so as to supplement imperfections in autonomy in some fields, such as wealth distribution, primary goods, relationships, education, and environmental factors, all of which would have a significant influence on individuals' respective levels of flourishing, that appropriate interventions are necessary. However, at the end of Chapter 8, Synowich provides six "general principles about egalitarian human flourishing" (171–172) to help us develop a brief profile. Then she explains six considerations concerning the contribution of public good to the flourishing of individuals (181–186), but she also holds the view that national boundaries are necessary. The way to compromise is to keep a global vision while focusing on local practice (189–191), for example, the prospering of the arts and the conservation of historical buildings. Cultural worldliness is interested in distinctive contributions of different cultures, while moral worldliness is interested in moral duties to persons apart from cultures (196). The flourishing approach, which is the marriage of moral worldliness and cultural worldliness, guides us in acting toward the goal of allowing local populations to flourish so that they can cultivate their ability to engage in self-determination regardless of the desires and value assessments of others.

After debating different ideas, Synowich concludes that what egalitarians seek is the promotion of equality of flourishing. Everyone has a right to flourish, but people are able to achieve different levels of flourishing depending on factors including their environment, the effort they make, and their natural talents. Some people's flourishing might be under the basic level. Society should help people flourish, and the more radical goal is to achieve equality in flourishing. The flourishing approach posits an ambitious goal in guiding us to live well, and as such it encounters the criticism that the flourishing account is utopian. Synowich maintains that, while the flourishing approach does have a utopian urge, it is markedly different from utopianism: "Utopia has been defined as an 'ideally perfect society whose members live the best possible life,' or an 'imaginary ideal society'" (213). Her approach seeks to ensure that human beings live flourishing lives, which looks close to an ideal of perfection, but the goal is not perfection per se, because the idea of egalitarian flourishing allows for people being imperfect, vulnerable, and even flawed.

This is a very exciting account of how living a good life may be possible for all. However, there is some tension in her theory. Firstly, in Chapter 6, Synowich argues that "everyone's access to opportunities for developing talent should be as unfettered as possible" (121), and as the result of talent development, "the talented among us provide discoveries, ideas and works of art that enhance our culture, shape our society's institutions and practices, and improve our standard of living, health and quality of life" (121). Even for those who have an unusually high

level of flourishing, for example Mozart, sufficient benefit is still possible. On this point, Sypnowich writes, “those who lack the talent of a Mozart can nonetheless derive enormous fulfilment from, if not performing his music, then listening to it” (Sypnowich 2017, 144). But there will be a conflict, or a diminishment at least, when encounter a situation that “we could instead provide special education for children with disabilities to significantly improve their levels of flourishing” (146). Secondly, “personal contentment is an important feature of flourishing” (140), and thus the basic level of flourishing will vary from person to person, as well as vary in terms of the material aspect of emotions, and therefore, Sypnowich should relate her staggering thresholds to human diversity, but she does not. Thirdly, a staggered threshold approach refers to keeping the basic level on an upward trajectory (146), once everyone has achieved it, the basic level of flourishing will be raised. This means that state intervention will only occur through equalization and that it will do nothing for the promotion of geniuses. Additionally, the primary goal of the human flourishing approach is for everyone to reach a basic level of flourishing, however, those who are stubbornly below the basic level of prosperity will indirectly hinder the development of talents. Fourthly, the flourishing account is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it contains much more than a singular conception of resources, welfare, opportunities, races, gender, and even cultures, and to some degree, we can say flourishing extends to cover all of these areas. This is precisely its merit. On the other hand, the flourishing account is too ambitious, too hollow, and too weak in its argument for specific themes, because when we put it into practice, it inevitably depends on conceptions of resources, welfare, opportunities, races, gender, and cultures. Last, but not least, one huge hurdle is the concern that this account is committed to coercing people to flourish.¹ It risks going against the will of those who choose to live a life of less flourishing. The egalitarian flourishing account is based on the assumptions that we can discern what is a flourishing life and that everyone wants to live such a life. But what about someone who wants to lead a life of hardship for some reason, or people who have special interests and accordingly do not want to live the type of life that Sypnowich describes as flourishing? Can we push such people to have a home, a stable job, sufficient friendships and other relationships?

It goes without saying that this is a book which provides a serious academic discussion of political philosophy and which contains a wealth of primary and secondary literature, discussing specific topics in depth. Sypnowich is very familiar with Marx’s works and arguments in the context of contemporary political philoso-

¹ This idea comes from Owen Clifton, who is a member of the political philosophy reading group in Queen’s university.

phy, and she is also adept at relating ideas from canonical works to current topics. When combining these things together, she is able to give Marx's views a contemporary perspective. In the process of reading her work, I often marveled at her keen thinking and unexpected arguments. For example, she uses Marx's famous idea of the "all-round development of the individual" (135) to argue that in order to flourish, human beings should be understood in all their diversity; she uses Marx's slogan "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs" (147) to argue for separating between contribution and distribution, and promoting individual responsibility for human wellbeing (147), also using this slogan to support the argument that human flourishing should not be conceived of as a monolith, there instead being multiple models of flourishing.

In general, this book is quite interesting; it provides a framework for discussing politics and political philosophy and it also provides a new horizon for thinking about contemporary political themes. I recommend it to everyone interested in topics in contemporary politics.

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