Equality Renewed

Justice, Flourishing and the Egalitarian Ideal

Christine Sypnowich
The literature on egalitarianism is a crowded one but, in her ambitious and engaging book, Christine Sypnowich is able to carve out a distinctive position that takes human flourishing to be central. She defends her novel ‘egalitarian perfectionism’ by careful engagement with topical issues such as racial justice, gender equality, multiculturalism and liberal neutrality about the good. *Equality Renewed* is at once an original contribution to egalitarianism and a splendid analysis of the central debates of political philosophy.

Kok-Chor Tan, *University of Pennsylvania, USA*
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Equality Renewed

How should we approach the task of renewing the ideal of equality?

In this book, Christine Sypnowich proposes a theory of equality centred on human flourishing or wellbeing. She argues that egalitarianism should be understood as aspiring to make people more equal in the constituents of a good life. Inequality is a social ill because of the damage it does to human flourishing: unequal distribution of wealth can have the effect that some people are poorly housed, badly nourished, ill-educated, unhappy or uncultured, among other things. When we seek to make people more equal our concern is not just resources or property, but how people fare under one distribution or another. Ultimately, the best answer to the question ‘equality of what?’ is some conception of flourishing, since whatever policies or principles we adopt, it is flourishing that we hope will be more equal as a result of our endeavours.

Sypnowich calls for both retrieval and innovation. What is to be retrieved is the ideal of equality itself, which is often assumed as a background condition of theories of justice, yet at the same time, dismissed as too homogenising, abstract and rigid a criterion for political argument. We must retrieve the ideal of equality as a central political principle. As for innovation, her approach calls for a new direction that, instead of focussing on cultural difference, or the idea of political neutrality, proposes an egalitarian political philosophy that conceives of the state as enabling the betterment of its citizens.

Christine Sypnowich is Professor of Philosophy and Queen’s National Scholar at Queen’s University at Kingston, Canada. She is the author of The Concept of Socialist Law (Oxford, 1990), and editor (with David Bakhurst) of The Social Self (Sage, 1995), and The Egalitarian Conscience: Essays in Honour of G.A. Cohen (Oxford, 2006). Her work has appeared in such journals as Political Theory, Oxford Journal of Legal Studies, New Left Review and Politics and Society.
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For David, Rosemary and Hugh
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This book is about the significance of human flourishing, or what’s often called ‘the good life,’ for the idea of equality. The project has been a long time in the making. A number of people, many of them good friends, provided invaluable advice and support along the way, and the book’s history reminds me of how, as Aristotle says, philosophy and friendship are constituents of a life well lived.

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Finally, besides friendship and philosophy, there is a third ‘f’ that is constitutive of flourishing, for me at least, and that’s family. My work, often done very early in the morning before others have stirred, was much enhanced, over the years, by the company of four feline companions: Koshka, Kolya, Luna and Felix. But most important, this book is dedicated to my husband, daughter and son, without whom flourishing, both personally and philosophically, would be unthinkable. I met my husband, David Bakhurst, when we were both graduate students in Oxford, many years ago, and I feel extraor

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Introduction
Human Flourishing and the Century of Equality

In the spring of 1991, just a few months before the attempted coup on Gorbachev and the subsequent fall of communism, I made a trip to Moscow. I had last been there in the mid-1980s, in the heyday of glasnost and perestroika, when Western Leftists could nurture the hope that a democratic socialism was in the making. On this trip however, I confronted the unraveling of this possibility, with the hitherto unthinkable social chaos that had begun to pervade the city. In the old days Moscow had been almost pathologically well ordered and law-abiding: theft, vandalism, even graffiti were unheard of. If one made the mistake of dropping a sweet wrapper on the pavement, scolding from fellow citizens (particularly the babushkas or grandmas) was the inevitable result. Now crime was an issue, and in gargantuan proportions. As soon as our friends met us in the airport, they warned us of baggage handlers who stole the contents of suitcases and taxi drivers who robbed and murdered their Western passengers. We ourselves observed en route to our hotel the total disregard of motorists for the directions of traffic policemen or the most obvious rules of the road. Once settled in, we learned that the age-old system of bribes to obtain restaurant tables and services was now undertaken exclusively in the hitherto banned foreign currency of American dollars; travelling in the city we saw that one could purchase from street vendors, not just overpriced cosmetics and trinkets from Asia, but also poor facsimiles of Western pornography. At one market, even weapons were for sale. In the academy, young scholars at the Institute of Philosophy, in their abhorrence of things socialist, were absorbed in a curious blend of philosophising drawn from Derrida and Foucault, New Age trends and Slavophile romanticism about Mother Earth.

Shaken by all this, I sought refuge in the Tretiakov Gallery and its special exhibition of Bolshoievik art. Here I found sustenance for my flagging socialist spirit. One of the works was a poster depicting a Russian woman, with arms outstretched, welcoming a woman from one of the Islamic republics, who was represented with the veil or hijab coming away as she stepped forward into her Soviet sister’s embrace. The poster was emblazoned with a slogan that said something like: ‘welcome, sisters from the republics!’ The picture was both moving and disconcerting. Moving, because its appeal to the ideal of universal comradeship, a belief in the fundamental equality of human
beings and the possibility of liberation from repressive custom and tradition. Disconcerting, because the picture was of an ideal now lost, but also because the ideal itself was ambiguous. The universal community of equality was after all premised on the abandonment, if not the forcible removal, of particular cultural identities. The price for stepping into modernity and equal citizenship was the loss of one’s place and sense of self in a traditional heritage. And in the symbolic order of socialist realism there was no concession that this was a loss to regret. Now, as I wandered the streets of Moscow, the socialist ideal of equality was, in turn, being abandoned where it once had seemed so entrenched.

What’s Wrong with Equality?

Is equality an ideal of the past? The twentieth century might be dubbed the century where the ideal of equality had the greatest practical and philosophical influence. The idea that all human beings should be treated as equals shaped political movements, public policy and philosophical debate. Equality motivated revolutions and wars, movements and struggles. Problems of equality were central to the development of societies as diverse as the Soviet Union and the United States, Canada and Cuba, South Africa and Britain. The ideal of equality underlay the suffrage movements that extended the vote to propertyless men and women. Equality animated the civil rights movements in the United States and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa to give all members of a society the same rights and freedoms. In the postwar era, equality seemed impregnable in both West and East, for all the ideological confrontation of the Cold War. In the capitalist democracies, the welfare state was being forged, with entitlements to health care, unemployment insurance, public education, and welfare. In the countries of the Soviet empire, central planning provided the economic system with which to realise, however ineptly, Marx’s slogan of ‘from each according to his abilities and to each according to his needs.’

How things have changed. Today it is not the behemoth of Soviet socialism but its collapse that provides the context for reflection on equality. Moreover, not only has the egalitarian ideology of Soviet communism been swept aside and replaced by a harsh creed of survival of the fittest, but also capitalist democracies in the West have come to challenge egalitarian principles. Thus we have witnessed the decline of the postwar welfare state, sometimes at the hands of putatively progressive governments, responding to diminished confidence in the ideal of equality wrought by ‘New Right’ parties, or the imperative to commit to a programme of austerity. The dynamics are complex, but perhaps the beleaguering of equality is the result, in part, of its success. This is not to say that people are more equal: the gap between people from rich and poor countries has grown, and within affluent countries there is a widening gap between the haves and have-nots. As Piketty documents in his influential work, there has been a ‘spectacular increase in inequality,’ such that ‘inequalities of wealth that had supposedly disappeared are close to regaining
or even surpassing their historical highs. However, if we measure what people consume, standards of living in the West have improved over the past thirty years, even in societies like the United States where inequality has grown the most. There is more ownership of consumer durables, size of living space has increased, and people’s life expectancy has improved. As the 2011 London riots demonstrated, where political action was coordinated via texting on cell phones, even those of bleak prospects and modest means possess sophisticated personal communication devices. Yet, although there has been an expansion in low-earning jobs, the end of the twentieth century saw an even greater expansion in higher earning jobs. Disadvantage has not been eliminated because it has been mitigated in certain significant ways.

Equality’s fortunes in the realm of political theory have been similar. Equality figured as both an undisputed framework and a subject of controversy in most political theories written in the last century. Its power was such that rival concepts took on an egalitarian cast. Thus liberty was couched as an ideal to which all are equally entitled; community is a characteristic of the truly egalitarian society; and democracy was the political system that holds government accountable to all its citizens equally. The currency of equality was such that philosophies across the spectrum all claimed to be egalitarian, insisting on individuals’ equal rights to liberty and property or the importance of the redistribution of wealth to further equal wellbeing. Critics of equality increasingly made their case in purportedly egalitarian terms. Consider, in the history of equality’s struggles, how a sexual division of labour often relied on chivalrous concepts of women’s special virtues that were portrayed as unlike but no less worthy than male attributes. In the domain of race, the ‘separate but equal’ doctrine paradoxically used the idea of equality to ward off the egalitarian cause, in a way that would ultimately undermine the case for racial segregation.

As for resistance to social welfare, libertarians pride themselves on rejecting the redistribution of wealth by appeal to an argument based on equality, that is, that an equal entitleent to liberty would be infringed by the taxation required to remedy economic disadvantage. Thus, insofar as conservative critics have found success, as the egalitarian project suffered a backlash on several fronts, it was in large part because of their capacity to frame their opposition in terms of equality, in rhetoric if not substance. It would be archaic today to propose that human beings are rightly born to a hierarchy of status or station, or that there is a class of superior persons who should rule the inferior. Some conservatives might still think such things, but they don’t dare say them. We are all egalitarians now, it might be said, in the triumphalist spirit that characterised the millennium and the dawn of the twenty-first century.

However, millennial triumphalism about equality would be misplaced. Equality is not an ideal that has enjoyed some kind of undisputed, hegemonic influence in the domain of theory any more than the realm of practice. Equality has been a target in both senses of the word: it has been a goal to which philosophers have aspired, but also an object of criticism and challenge.
Introduction

This is a book about equality and how the ideal should be renewed in political philosophy. My aim is to rejuvenate the ideal by critically assessing contemporary challenges in political theory and reformulating the ideal’s philosophical underpinnings. To this end, I deploy a new approach based on the idea of human flourishing, which demonstrates the relevance and power of a reinvigorated egalitarianism. I call for both retrieval and innovation. What is to be retrieved is the ideal of equality itself, which we have on the one hand unreflectively assumed, and on the other carelessly rejected, allowing it to be tainted by its connection with failed historic experiments and impugned by new progressive claims. We must retrieve the ideal of equality as a central political principle. As for innovation, my approach calls for a new direction. I reject the concept of the neutral state – an idea that dominates contemporary political philosophy – for a view of the state as enabling the betterment of its citizens. I argue that if we understand equality as centred on a concept of human flourishing, we can illuminate several debates in contemporary political philosophy and thereby affirm the egalitarian ideal.

It is hardly surprising that an idea so central to political debate over the last century should find criticism and attack. More surprising is that the ideal of equality has been rocked from within. There are two kinds of challenge at issue here. First, the most successful challenges to equality in the twentieth century had egalitarian roots: challenges posed by nationalism, multiculturalism, and the broad, cultural Left that emerged from debates within feminism and postmodernism. The second challenge is that egalitarian thought of the past generation has abandoned its original commitment to human wellbeing, a commitment that makes sense of equality, and, as I will argue, resolves a variety of egalitarian conundrums, including the problems of cultural difference. Indeed, these two challenges, the problem of difference, and the neutralism of liberal political thought, are connected.

Liberals have long been exercised by the problem of whether equality occludes diversity. This concern has been prominent in recent debates, but the problem of difference dogged equality a long time before that. Nationalist movements in particular contended that states that purported to treat their members equally were, in their disrespect for national differences, in fact unequal. Some of these movements, of course, responded to inegalitarian policies ranging from the denial of equality of opportunity to ethnic cleansing, but they also expressed dissatisfaction with the ideal of equality itself. Equality as a cardinal Enlightenment ideal had a homogenising aspect, an urge to understand all human beings by a common criterion, be it humanity, social class, or citizenship. Can one have equality without universality, that is, the idea of human beings as members of a universal moral order? If the answer to this is no, then many were prepared to say: So much for equality.

The idea of difference came to the fore in the 1990s and is now so much part of the political wallpaper that it is easy to forget how significant were its interventions. But in order to appreciate the contemporary shape of egalitarian debate, we need to understand the impact of the view that equality is tainted by a disregard for diversity. The difference critiques were, in a sense,
The perspectives of the ‘freedom fighter,’ taking aim at oppression, and in that way building on the egalitarian project in their very rejection of it. They were not, on the face of it, hostile to furthering the equal wellbeing of individuals, yet they took issue with the idea of a common humanity that justified equal entitlement to respect and resources. They sought the special recognition of ethnic groups, secession for national minorities, separate arrangements for distinctive cultures, scope for the ethic of particular groups. They thus moulded a number of debates in political philosophy, about multiculturalism, distributive justice, and the nature of democracy.

The difference critiques initiated a fruitful process of self-reflection and revision on the part of egalitarians. But these critiques also had some costs. It was unclear whether equality was being served or rejected, and those who had no desire to promote equality could interpret these debates as a licence to dump the constraints of egalitarianism from their political agendas. This was particularly easy to do in light of the claim by advocates of difference that politics could not be understood in terms of discharging a responsibility to members of a common project, but rather merely reflected the assertion of particular and incommensurable interests. It has been said that the previous century, although it appeared to be characterised by a conflict between capitalism and communism, was in fact dominated by conflicts between nationality and ethnicity. Such conflicts, bringing with them calls for secession, forced emigration and war, invited philosophical resolution that seemed unconnected to, if not in tension with, the ideal of equality. The result has been a sense of pessimism and loss among the Left about equality’s prospects. My book seeks to remedy this.

Along with the challenge of difference came a second challenge, the philosophical preoccupation with neutrality. Here it appears that equality’s greatest problem is, to put it baldly, what egalitarian philosophers have done to it. It is often remarked that political philosophy was in the doldrums for most of this century. Rebirth came in 1971, with the publication of Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice.* Before Rawls, Anglo-American political philosophy lived in the shadow of positivist views that had dominated philosophy in the early part of this century. The strict delineation of conceptual from empirical enquiry, and of matters of fact from matters of value, so characteristic of logical positivism, lingered in the ordinary language philosophy that succeeded it. But whereas ethics could turn itself into a meta-discipline concerned with the scope and limits of taken-for-granted moral concepts, the intrinsically controversial nature of political prescriptions meant that such a metamorphosis was not available for political theory. As a branch of philosophy that sought to direct rather than merely describe human practices, political theory was therefore cast as a non-subject, its place taken by the paltry exercises of ordinary language that interrogated the senses in which speakers use political vocabulary. This was a long way from the Ancient Greeks’ original idea of political philosophy as reasoned inquiry into how we ought to live in common. The diminished role of political philosophy as a normative exercise doubtless reflected, not just an empiricist outlook in philosophy, but also a smug
acceptance of the empirically given; i.e. the liberal institutions of capitalist democracies in the postwar period. The dogmatism about politics that came with the Cold War helps explain why political philosophy was in a state of stagnation. Such complacency was jolted, however, by conservative attacks on the welfare state, attacks that prompted the considered response of Rawls.

Rawls’s thesis is that inequalities are justified only if they are to the advantage of the worst-off in society. According to Rawls’s thought experiment, if individuals deliberate about principles of justice without knowing who they are to be in the society they are designing, they would opt for basic liberties along with a redistributive scheme; moreover, they would be concerned that society not use political means to endorse one way of living over another. Rawls thus rejuvenates the social contract tradition, founding political prescriptions on claims of a quasi-empirical kind about human reasoning and motivation. In later work, Rawls developed this theme of neutrality into the idea of ‘political liberalism,’ in which the state is liberal in a narrowly political sense. The state must eschew any commitment on what Rawls calls ‘comprehensive doctrines,’ i.e. substantive philosophical or moral views. Citizens must be reasonable and not ask their fellow citizens to live by others’ creeds. They should thus subscribe to the value of neutrality, a value that, nonetheless, emerges from practices current in contemporary liberal societies.

Something like Rawlsian neutrality came to be the position of most liberal egalitarians. Indeed, even liberal defenders of multicultural citizenship, who one would expect to offer some argument about value, have put their case in neutral terms. My colleague, Will Kymlicka, is the most prominent advocate of this idea, in his argument that protection of minority cultures is derived from the neutral liberal’s commitment to choice. But it is unclear whether the case for equality can proceed without making some kind of commitment on questions of value, of how we should live, in particular the value of autonomy and our need for the resources to lead autonomous lives. Resolute in its avoidance of questions of the good, egalitarian debate ends up operating with a model of the person that is so uninspired it looks, as one commentator put it, ‘suspiciously like the modern office worker.’ Rawls resuscitated political philosophy, but perhaps he did so by keeping it semi-conscious, for in banning controversy about value from the domain of public debate, political philosophy became curiously apolitical.

Connected to the focus on neutrality are a number of other implausible commitments. There is the hyper-individualistic premiss that one is entitled to the remedy of disadvantage no matter what, manifest in the ‘welfare for surfers’ credo of Van Parijs, or arguments that to equalise citizens’ welfare requires us to sate the expensive tastes of the few. These moves are understandable; they were premised on the idea that equality requires satisfaction of needs and should therefore not be tied to individuals’ ability to contribute to need satisfaction, nor, given the diversity of needs and interests, subject to some crude common denominator. But the result has hardly attracted adherents to the egalitarian cause. As Anderson has put it, ‘if much recent academic
work defending equality had been secretly penned by conservatives, could the results be any more embarrassing for egalitarians? All this has highlighted vulnerabilities in philosophical egalitarianism in a way that makes the call for attention to the inequalities of race, sex and ethnicity particularly compelling.

A New Approach

How should we approach the daunting task of renewing the ideal of equality? I propose a theory of equality centred on human flourishing or wellbeing. Distribution of resources, goods or income is, after all, merely instrumental to the fundamental goal of living well. There is a certain sterility in zeroing in on money or goods as a matter of social justice. The mere fact that there are disparities of wealth is undeniably the preoccupation of both influential scholarly works such as *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, and the political activism exemplified by the Occupy Wall Street movement, and it certainly signals injustice. However, its significance for egalitarians should lie in the consequences of disparities for how people live, how inequality of income affects people’s quality of life. Relational egalitarians have responded by focussing only on our relative status or standing vis-à-vis each other, that is, on relations of respect and democratic citizenship, but this threatens to excise economic issues altogether. I am interested in wellbeing more broadly, in people’s ability to live well, which is clearly determined to a significant extent by their access to material goods. Here I will note a few features of my approach that I develop in the chapters that follow.

Human flourishing requires a ‘culture of citizenship,’ which provides the sense of membership and reciprocity necessary for equalisation, but which also figures as a means of access for political participation and the pursuit of autonomy essential for flourishing. Accordingly, it is the task of the egalitarian state to enable citizens to live worthwhile lives. This involves an emphasis on culture as a source of the individual’s development. Minority cultures do this, but so of course does the majority one. Living well requires possibilities provided by culture, in the widest sense of the word. They include such things as literature, art galleries, music, education, physical activity, enjoyment of nature, sporting spectacles, traditional crafts, or historic architecture. There is no single way of living well; the human flourishing approach must be resolutely pluralist.

An important feature of a well-lived life is autonomy. A vital autonomy-enabling social condition is freedom from interference, and it cannot be stressed too much that my call for an interest in the kinds of choices people make retains the traditional liberal antipathy to coercion. But non-interference is insufficient. A second set of social conditions that enable autonomy are institutions that assure some minimum level of material wellbeing, since autonomy is undermined by hunger and homelessness. Autonomy refers to self-determination, and this means individuals should live under conditions where they are authors of their lives and masters of their fate. I propose that
in addition to autonomy, human wellbeing involves objectively valuable pursuits and contentment, which in turn require arrangements that attend to material wellbeing and that make available activities and practices that facilitate living well.

In the course of developing this view I will consider how it might be characterised. It has been dubbed ‘perfectionist,’ but it is important that our understanding of cultural enrichment eschew the idea of perfection per se. Human fulfilment is an open-ended task that can be achieved in a variety of worthwhile ways. Cultural diversity provides possibilities that benefit not just the adherents of particular cultures, but us all. The society seeking equality of flourishing thus needs to be a supportive environment for a wide range of cultural practices that promote wellbeing. Indeed, for all the talk in philosophy of a neutral liberal state, the liberal state in practice is in fact perfectionist to some degree, deploying subsidies or grants to support valuable cultural possibilities.

The difficulty in attending to the reality of politics was brought home to me some time ago when I was on a radio programme as a member of a lively three-philosopher panel on ‘The Public Good.’ Reflecting on it afterwards I was struck by how we philosophers were incapable, in some fundamental sense, of seriously addressing our subject matter: the idea of the public good. Schooled in the neutralist liberalism that dominates political philosophy, we took for granted that seeking a consensus on value was symptomatic of a dangerous, moralising conservatism. We thus sidestepped the issue of the public good per se by considering the means by which individuals might pursue their private goods and discussing what means, be they healthcare, education or social welfare, the public was obligated to provide. However, our host assumed the cogency of the idea of the public good, and took it as the first premiss of a discussion of politics. For most citizens and political leaders, too, the phrase ‘public good’ is no embarrassment, but inherent in the task of governance, which includes supporting institutions of culture, enabling a degree of civility in citizens’ dealings with each other, and providing conditions of self-development and improvement that enriches individual and community: in short, to enable human flourishing.

This book tackles a range of topics in making the case for a flourishing approach to equality. In the first part, Challenges to Equality, I consider the debates in political philosophy that emerged in the last generation about sex, race and cultural difference. I argue that these debates, for all their influence on today’s cultural-political landscape, have been unable to capture what is at stake in remedying injustice, that is, human wellbeing. My human flourishing approach, I contend, serves as an important corrective to the weaknesses of the preoccupation with ‘difference’ and provides a case for renewing the ideal of equality.

Chapter 1, Beyond Difference, describes how the idea of difference emerged to present one of the most exciting and formidable challenges to liberal conceptions of justice, a challenge that continues to prompt invaluable soul-searching about egalitarian commitments and goals. I assess the debates
about human diversity and contend that the idea of equality must remain our compass; difference itself is an inadequate normative framework. Instead of identity as such, we should focus on the interests that accrue from different identities and the extent to which they reflect inequalities that require political redress. In so doing, we cannot help but refer to a common measure of wellbeing.

Chapter 2, Race, Culture and the Egalitarian Conscience, takes up the difference that has been the source of the most challenging of intractable injustices: race. Here I consider the twin approaches of ‘colour blindness,’ whereby the appropriate response to racism is to treat race as irrelevant both philosophically and politically, and ‘colour consciousness,’ whereby race is the basis of policies of affirmative action, reparations, and a cultural identity. I recommend that whilst we should not deny the reality of race, we should not make too much of racial difference. To attend to racial injustice requires a conception of our common humanity and our common interest in living flourishing lives.

The deep-seated conviction that the universal is never truly so, that it always excludes the other, the alien and different, emerged philosophically in feminist debate. Chapter 3, Androgyny and Girl Power: Sex, Equality and Human Goods, focuses on the feminist challenge to the egalitarian ideal, which shifted from insisting on equal treatment under the rules, to a questioning of the partiality of the rules themselves. The idea that women’s interests were best served by being treated the same as men was inevitably refined in light of women’s biological distinctiveness; but it also came to be revised because of claims about cultural and moral differences between men and women. I argue that instead of fixating on the nature of gender and gender identity, we should focus on the sources of human wellbeing, for women and men, and on how to organise a society that enables equal human flourishing, in all its diverse forms, regardless of sex or gender.

The second part of the book, Liberal Revisionism, focusses on two prominent political philosophers in the liberal tradition. In Chapter 4, Impartiality, Difference and Wellbeing, I consider Rawls’s political liberalism. I argue that the answer to the difference challenge is not to retreat, as Rawls does, behind the vulnerable fortress of neutrality. Rawls’s ideas of reason, impartiality and cooperation are, on the one hand, indispensable for social life; without them, the claims of difference threaten to destroy the possibility of social justice of any kind. However, these resources must be justified, ultimately, by reference to a substantive conception of the good, one that is in fact implied by Rawls’s own argument. Chapter 5, Equality and the Antinomies of Multicultural Liberalism, considers Kymlicka’s highly influential argument for multicultural citizenship. I maintain that the argument for ‘group-differentiated citizenship’ deploys criteria of autonomy and equality that bear a problematic relationship to the idea of cultural rights. I conclude that a focus on culture’s relation to human wellbeing requires a much more radical revision of liberal political philosophy that focusses on equal human flourishing.

The third part of the book, Equality and Living Well, elaborates my flourishing account of equality. Chapter 6, What Equality Is and Is Not, initiates
the flourishing approach with a look at three conceptual challenges to egalitarianism. The first is that egalitarianism is mired in a commitment to ‘leveling down,’ where equality of resources is to be preferred over any other distribution, even if equality reduces the resources available to the better off at no benefit to the worse off. The second problem is that of talent and its recognition; here it is charged that egalitarian distribution implies effacing or ignoring talent. The third problem is that of the relation between equality and partiality, in which the promotion of equality is taken to involve the elimination of any special regard one has for one’s own interests or the interests of particular others. These three problems demonstrate that: first, equality is important because of its effect on wellbeing, rather than having some kind of intrinsic value independent of human beings’ welfare or interests; and second, the egalitarian ideal is best served by aiming for equality in flourishing rather than in the distribution of goods, resources, or even welfare.

Chapter 7, Human Flourishing and the Use and Abuse of Equality, sets out the philosophical context of an egalitarianism centred on the idea of flourishing that seeks to improve and equalise human wellbeing. First, I show how my flourishing approach has historical antecedents in socialist writings from Morris to Marx to Beveridge, but that it also draws on the ideas of contemporary egalitarians such as Sen and Nussbaum. I explain how flourishing consists in autonomy, objectively worthwhile pursuits, and satisfaction, and how public policy might remedy shortfalls in wellbeing. The argument endorses perfectionism, but in a version equipped to ward off the charge of paternalism often brought against perfectionism. I argue that a flourishing approach to equality promises a robust political philosophy that can withstand common objections made to theories of equality, on the one hand, and theories of the good life, on the other.

Chapter 8, Autonomy and Living Well, takes up this question: Can a theory of equality focussed on human flourishing respect individuals’ freedom to choose how to live? The view that we should hold people responsible for their choices, discussed in the previous chapter, follows from another liberal principle, that is, that we should respect people’s capacity to make choices. But the emphasis on choice sits awkwardly with perfectionism, since people can make choices detrimental to their flourishing. Here we have the crux of a fundamental controversy in the idea of egalitarian perfectionism. On the one hand, its focus on flourishing suggests people need direction as to how to live, and on the other, because choice is a constituent of flourishing, flourishing seems undermined by such direction. Perfectionism continues to be dogged by the problem of paternalism. I argue that a proper appreciation of the nature of agency and choice renders my flourishing approach consistent with, and moreover, conducive to, the liberal commitment to individual autonomy.

My human flourishing account of equality can be deployed to consider those most vexing matters of inequality, that is disparities between the haves and have-nots in the global context. This is the subject of Chapters 9 and 10. Debates about equality tend to take as their premiss the relations among
citizens in a single society. However, problems of inequality obviously go beyond a particular territory or country; indeed, disparities in flourishing are most egregious from an international perspective. And yet we lack the capacity to redress global injustice: institutional resources, human motivation and the concepts of political philosophy all presume the predominance of the nation-state paradigm and its corollary of obligations among citizens.

In Chapter 9, Equality and the Public Good: Local and Global, I point out that the idea that society should promote a culture favourable to human flourishing raises the thorny problem of ‘the public good,’ the idea with which I began this book. If, as I argue, we should seek to make people’s shared environment conducive to choices that enable human flourishing, then it seems inevitable that we would seek to further the public good. I address the complaint that the idea of the public good evokes a supra-individual entity or a conservative affection for tradition, arguing that the concept can specify substantive goods yet remain inclusive and universal enough to apply to the problems of global inequality. Chapter 10, Cosmopolitans, Cosmopolitanism and Human Flourishing, further subjects my flourishing approach to perhaps the toughest test of an egalitarian theory, what it can contribute to the promotion of equality, not among citizens, but around the globe. Few egalitarians would dispute that richer peoples have duties of redistribution to poorer peoples. The question is how extensive these duties of global justice are, particularly in comparison to the duties of domestic justice. I argue that focusing on rendering human flourishing more equal enables us to find a middle course, which affirms our cosmopolitan duties whilst recognising the critical role of a culture of self-determining citizenship. If we are to attempt to remedy global inequality, then we must consider how cultural practices affect human flourishing.

In the Conclusion, I wrap up the book’s argument and consider some of its implications for larger issues in political theory such as utopianism and democracy. I note the importance of a political philosophy that is alive to utopian aspirations, that doesn’t flinch from ambitious political ideals, yet is moderated by a sense of our human limitations.

As we make our way through the twenty-first century, equality is both taken for granted and dismissed, a victim of its practical successes, however chequered, and its philosophical confusions. What is needed is a new, vigorous understanding of equality founded on the principle of human well-being. Greater equality should mean greater access to a plurality of worthwhile ways of living. In the argument that follows, I set out the limitations of current theories of justice, as well as the features of an alternative egalitarian position. I hope that equality is thereby renewed.

Notes
1 K. Marx, ‘Critique of the Gotha Programme,’ 531.
2 This is the case in affluent societies such as Canada, the U.S. and the U.K., as well as globally. According to the Broadbent Institute’s reports, Canadians ‘underestimate
the breadth and depth of wealth inequality’ which has worsened in the period 1998–2012, with the top 20 per cent owning 67.4 per cent of the country’s wealth and the bottom 30 per cent owning less than 1 per cent of the wealth. See the Broadbent Institute, ‘The Wealth Gap: Perceptions and Misconceptions in Canada,’ and ‘Haves and Have-Nots: Deep and Persistent Wealth Inequality in Canada.’ Income inequality is particularly severe in the U.S., which is the 43rd most unequal country in the world, and is confronting rates of inequality not seen since the Great Depression, with the top 1 per cent taking home more than 20 per cent of all personal income, largely due to the high rise in pay for company executives, giving rise to protest movements such as Occupy Wall Street. See CIA, World Fact Book, 2011. In the U.K., where the poorest tenth of people receive only 1 per cent of total income, whilst the richest tenth take home 31 per cent: ‘it is predicted that, on current trends, the U.K. will rapidly return to levels of inequality not seen since Victorian times,’ M. Haddad, The Perfect Storm: Economic stagnation, the rising cost of living, spending cuts, and the impact on UK poverty. According to the World Bank, although the growing prosperity of countries such as China has meant that the disparity between rich and poor globally has lowered slightly, income inequality within countries is worse than ever; moreover, the poorest 24 countries have only 1 per cent of total world income. Conference Board of Canada, ‘World Income Inequality: Is the world becoming more unequal?’

5. ‘Retrieval’ comes from C.B. Macpherson, Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval. Macpherson sought to retrieve the liberal tradition’s political commitment to autonomy that, he claimed, was undermined by some liberals’ economic allegiance to private enterprise.
6. This is a theme in E. Hobsbawm, Age of Extremes.
8. J. Rawls, Political Liberalism.
12. Also a point stressed by Pinketty, who worries about inequality as a ‘source of powerful political tensions,’ but who is otherwise surprisingly unrevealing about what is bad about inequality per se, Capital in the Twenty-First Century, 570.
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