



In the Shadow of Rawls: Egalitarianism Today

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Abstract

Two recent collections of papers—*Social Equality: On What It Means to Be Equals*, edited by Carina Fourie, Fabian Schuppert, and Ivo Wallimann-Helmer (Fourie et al. 2015) and *The Equal Society: Essays on Equality in Theory and Practice*, edited by George Hull (Hull 2015)—demonstrate well the wide diversity of perspectives on egalitarianism within political theory today. But there are unifying themes amidst all this diversity. In particular, these collections make plain the extent to which contemporary egalitarianism in all forms is indebted to Rawls. This debt is reflected, for example, in the luck egalitarianism/social egalitarian debate which plays a central role in both books. It is also reflected in the concern so many contemporary egalitarians have for respect and its social basis. But while egalitarianism today owes much to Rawls, this does not mean that Rawls has nothing left to contribute to the conversation. This essay will argue that a return to Rawls can help contemporary egalitarians avoid taking their debates in certain unproductive directions.

Keywords Distributive egalitarianism · Equality · Luck egalitarianism · John Rawls · Respect · Social egalitarianism

Egalitarians believe in equality. From there, it gets complicated.

All egalitarians can be said, in some sense, to desire an equal society. But it is difficult to say what that means at a level that all egalitarians could accept. In an equal society, what is supposed to be equal to what? Are people supposed to receive equal amounts of something? (And if so, what?) Or are they supposed to be treated equally? (And if so, in what respects?) Or are they supposed to be treated as equals? (And if so, in what ways?) In political phi-

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losophy, it sometimes seems like there are more answers to these questions than there are egalitarians.¹

Two recent collections of papers—*The Equal Society: Essays on Equality in Theory and Practice*, edited by George Hull (2015, hereafter *TES*) and *Social Equality: On What It Means to Be Equals*, edited by Carina Fourie, Fabian Schuppert, and Ivo Wallimann-Helmer (2015; hereafter *SE*)—capture well the breadth and depth of contemporary debates regarding egalitarianism. Virtually all of the contributors are egalitarians,² and yet it is difficult to find any non-banal claim about equality that all of them would accept. But despite this fact, it is also not difficult to draw connections between the essays. Anyone interested in contemporary egalitarianism would thus benefit from reading these two volumes.

In this essay, I would like to examine one important connection that can be drawn between the essays in these two collections. Reading them makes very plain the enormous influence of John Rawls on contemporary egalitarianism. It is not too strong to say that Rawls has largely set the terms of debate regarding equality through his masterwork, *A Theory of Justice* (1999b). Fifty years after the publication of that book, egalitarian theory, like so many other areas of political theory, remains the house that Jack built (Laden 2003).

These two collections thus suggest two conclusions regarding egalitarian thought today. First, contemporary egalitarianism owes an enormous debt to Rawls, with many of its central parameters of debate set by *A Theory of Justice*. Second, a return to Rawls might occasionally help advance these debates in productive directions.

At the heart of debates within contemporary egalitarianism, as the books under consideration here make plain, is a contrast between two approaches to the subject—what I will call *distributive egalitarianism* and *social egalitarianism*.³ Distributive egalitarians “advocate the equal distribution of one of a range of *equalisanda*—in other words, what it is that should be equalized, such as political power, human rights, primary goods, opportunities for welfare, or capabilities” (*SE*, p. 1). In the words of G.A. Cohen, one of the most prominent distributive egalitarians, “there is something that justice requires people to have equal amounts of, not no matter what, but to whatever extent is allowed by values that compete with distributive equality” (Cohen 1989, p. 906).⁴ The challenge for distributive egalitarians, then, is to identify that which should be distributed equally to people, as well as the conditions under which deviations from equality are justified. This is commonly described as identifying the proper *currency* and *pattern* of distribution, respectively.⁵

The problem of currency specification has generated much attention. George Hull argues that the problem cannot be solved, at least within the terms set by contemporary liberal theory. These terms include satisfying conditions of determinacy, covariance, and pluralism (*TES*, pp. 144–145). Hull attempts to demonstrate the impossibility of simultaneously satisfying these conditions via a quick tour through the leading candidates in the literature. But

¹ Daniel Dennett observes that the religious share a belief in God while disagreeing vigorously about meaning of the word “God.” They can be said, according to Dennett, to *believe in belief* in God (Dennett 2006). Similarly, one may describe contemporary egalitarians as sharing a belief in belief in equality.

² The one exception is the paper by Tom P.S. Angier (*TES*, ch. 7), which offers a rather old-fashioned right-wing attack on egalitarianism. Its brevity is its greatest virtue.

³ These two approaches are sometimes called the *distributive* and *relational* views of equality (*SE*, pp. 21, 46).

⁴ This line is repeatedly referenced in both books (e.g., *SE*, p. 21; *TES*, pp. 21, 92).

⁵ Hull uses the terms “metric” and “rule” (*TES*, p. 138). Williams uses “metric” and “method” (*TES*, p. 120). Garrau and Laborde use “currency” and “principle” (*SE*, p. 46).

the terms themselves are rather vague as Hull specifies them. The determinacy condition, for example, simply requires that the currency be “sufficiently determinate” (*TES*, p. 144). Sufficient for what? Hull sees liberal theory’s only way out of this dilemma as “narrow[ing] down the list of conceptions of well-being to which a metric of distributive justice must be acceptable”—in other words, to weaken the pluralism condition (*TES*, p. 155). This is not an absurd suggestion, but Hull might have made his argument more compelling had he simply focused upon the problem of pluralism from the start.

One of the most prominent forms of distributive egalitarianism today is *luck egalitarianism*, which permits inequalities based upon the choices that individuals make but not factors beyond their control. Luck egalitarianism “requires society-members’ natural (brute) luck to be compensated, and the consequences of their informed adult choices (option luck) not to be” (*TES*, p. 6). Luck egalitarians often see themselves as developing an idea central to Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice*—the idea that society should equalize (in some way) the factors beyond people’s control and allow inequalities only to emerge as the result of the choices people make. Richard Arneson, for example, cites the following passage from Rawls as embodying the luck egalitarian position:

The basic structure is the primary subject of justice because its effects are so profound and present from the start. The intuitive notion here is that this structure contains various social positions and that men born into different positions have different expectations of life determined, in part, by the political system as well as by economic and social circumstances. In this way the institutions of society favor certain starting places over others. These are especially deep inequalities. Not only are they pervasive, but they affect men’s initial chances in life; yet they cannot possibly be justified by an appeal to the notions of merit and desert. It is these inequalities, presumably inevitable in the basic structure of any society, to which the principles of social justice apply (Rawls 1999b, p. 7; quoted in Arneson 2008, p. 80).

Arneson thus connects Rawls to luck egalitarian in a paper Marie Garrau and Cécile Laborde describe as the “paradigmatic exposition of the luck egalitarian position” (*SE*, p. 46, n. 4).

Luck egalitarians, then, agree that the appropriate pattern of distribution allows for inequalities based upon people’s choices. They disagree, however, regarding the appropriate currency. The two leading candidate currencies are resources and welfare. Bekka Williams, however, defends *capability* as the appropriate currency for luck egalitarians (*TES*, ch. 5).

The alternative to distributive egalitarianism is social egalitarianism. Social egalitarians aim at social equality, sometimes called relational equality, democratic equality, social-relational equality, or social status equality (*SE*, pp. 1, 107, n. 1; *TES*, p. 93). Social egalitarians “insist that, while the ideal of equality clearly has distributive implications and may well match certain distributive notions of equality, equality is foremost about relationships between people” (*SE*, p. 1). For social egalitarians, then, “The relevant question, in thinking about equality and distribution, is not ‘What is the currency of which justice requires an equal distribution?’ It is, rather, ‘What kinds of distributions are consistent with the ideal of a society of equals?’” (*SE*, p. 22; see also *TES*, p. 2). Social egalitarianism is of course the central focus of *Social Equality*, although not all the contributors to the book are social egalitarians.

Social egalitarianism has a long history. Versions of this position have been attributed to Thomas Paine, Mary Wollstonecraft, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and R.H. Tawney (*SE* pp. 2, 107, 211; *TES*, p. 22).⁶ But contemporary debates regarding social egalitarianism are also importantly indebted to Rawls. Consider, for example, the following passage from *A Theory of Justice*: “Some writers have distinguished between equality as it is invoked in connection with the distribution of certain goods, some of which will almost certainly give higher status or prestige to those who are more favored, and equality as it applies to the respect which is owed to persons irrespective of their social position” (Rawls 1999b, p. 447). Rawls clearly saw justice as fairness as embodying the second form of equality. This form is reflected in Elizabeth Anderson’s articulation of the social egalitarian position, which takes as its “positive aim...not to ensure that everyone gets what they morally deserve, but to create a community in which people stand in relations of equality to others” (Anderson 1999, pp. 288–289; quoted in *SE*, p. 47). (Anderson, not coincidentally, was a student of Rawls.)

Whereas critics of luck egalitarianism regularly point to its highly counterintuitive implications, critics of social egalitarianism accuse it of serious vagueness. “[T]he social egalitarian idea of respect for citizens can sometimes come across as vague—even slightly *ad hoc*,” writes Hull (*TES*, p. 12). Jonathan Wolff, who contributes a paper to each of these two volumes (*SE*, ch. 10; *TES*, ch. 1), makes a virtue of this. Following Sen (2009),⁷ Wolff argues that “the task for political philosophers is not to articulate an ideal of justice, but rather to identify manifest injustices and, if possible help to derive solutions to remedy such injustices” (*SE*, p. 209). Injustices are manifest not by virtue of being “widely acknowledged to be unjust;” rather, “these previously hidden or masked situations, when exposed and brought to full attention, will immediately elicit a judgment of clear injustice” (*SE*, pp. 217, 218). Social egalitarians should focus their attention upon this task of exposure, and not any effort to derive any form of unifying principles which explain their injustice.⁸ It is not at all clear to me, though, whether the exposure of social injustice is a task best left to philosophers, as opposed to journalists, political activists, etc. Moreover, Wolff does offer a limited positive formulation of social egalitarian principles. He speaks of “the absence of... asymmetric social relations” coupled with the need “to achieve a level of material well-being for all and to avoid antagonism and alienation, whether asymmetric or symmetric” (*SE*, p. 220). I have few complaints about this formulation, but I would see it as the starting point for philosophical analysis, rather than (as Wolff sees it) as an endpoint.

Ironically, Wolff produces an example which does much to undermine his own case. He notes that “Matthew Arnold argued that in the nineteenth century the French had managed to achieve something approaching social equality, where aristocrat and peasant could converse together, and had common interests, despite their obvious material inequality” (*TES*, p. 25; see also *SE*, p. 212). Wolff dodges the question of the validity of Arnold’s claim. But I for one would like to be able to dismiss Arnold’s claim as absurd, and I’d like any conception of social equality at least to be developed to a point that would make this dismissal possible.

Assuming, then, that social egalitarianism does indeed impose identifiable demands, there are at least two distinct ways of thinking about those demands. On the one hand,

⁶ One could add Marshall (1950) to this list, although none of the papers discussed here mention him.

⁷ For a critique of Sen’s approach, see Valentini (2011).

⁸ In principle, Wolff notes, distributive egalitarians could follow the same advice, but distributive egalitarianism lends itself more readily to precise formulation than social egalitarianism, and so advocates of the former will most likely find Wolff’s approach less congenial than advocates of the latter (*TES*, p. 22).

one can see social equality as constraining the *process* whereby it decides how, among other things, it distributes things. Samuel Scheffler, for example, sees the demand for social equality as generating an *egalitarian deliberative constraint* (*SE*, p. 25). According to this constraint, “the parties to an egalitarian relationship view each other as equally entitled to determine the future course and character of the relationship” (*SE*, p. 27). This equal entitlement requires them, for example, to treat the comparable interests of all involved parties as being of comparable importance. But there is “no single answer” to the question of “how the content of the parties’ decisions should be influenced by their respective interests” (*SE*, p. 28). Social egalitarianism, as embodied by the egalitarian deliberative constraint, “need not by itself yield any fully determinate principle for regulating the distribution of resources, not even a presumptive or *prima facie* one” (*SE*, p. 42). Indeed, Scheffler is highly sceptical that it could ever do so. And so for Scheffler, “There is no general formula or algorithm for determining how best to engage in the practice” of sustaining egalitarian relationships (*SE*, p. 3). This indeterminacy (vagueness?) will obviously satisfy few of social egalitarianism’s critics.

Both Miranda Fricker and Daniel Putnam also consider the constraints social equality might place upon the process of social interaction. For Fricker, these constraints stem from a need to ensure everyone effective *Epistemic Contribution*. Fricker regards Epistemic Contribution as a capability (in the sense articulated by Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen) that “is plausibly fundamental to human flourishing” (*TES*, p. 76). And so a society should ensure that its members enjoy “*epistemic relational equality*” (emphasis in original; *TES*, p. 77). This does not require that “everyone must enjoy the same level of Epistemic Contribution... Rather it means that all citizens must enjoy whatever basic level of Epistemic Contribution is deemed necessary for equal standing as a citizen” (p. 84). This means that social arrangements must be “such as to reliably ensure that those epistemic inputs are not rejected or under-rated” due to “epistemically irrelevant factors” (*TES*, p. 80). Such factors include “deliberate frustration” (someone shuts you up), “testimonial injustice” (people dismiss you due to prejudice), and “hermeneutical injustice” (people are unable to make themselves understood due to “hermeneutical marginalisation”) (*TES*, p. 79).

Putnam attempts to connect Scheffler with Fricker. He follows Scheffler in placing the equal recognition of equally important interests at the heart of social equality (*TES*, p. 91). He then argues that this recognition is impossible without “equality of intelligibility,” whereby citizens are equally capable of making their interests understood. This depends critically upon the “more or less implicit shared understanding of what interests count in politics, when they’re at stake, and how important they are for people’s well-being” (*TES*, pp. 100–101). For Putnam, this concern for equality of intelligibility provides a better normative grounding for Fricker’s concern with hermeneutic injustice than Fricker herself offers (*TES*, p. 105).

On the other hand, one could see social equality in substantive, not procedural, terms—as imposing constraints on how society should function, including how it distributes things. These constraints take different forms for different social egalitarians. Stefan Gosepath, for example, argues for a “*presumption of equality*,” a “*prima facie* principle of equal distribution for all goods that many scholars of political theory as well as public decision-makers/public opinion deem politically suitable for the process of public distribution” (emphasis in original; *SE*, 167). While Gosepath describes this presumption in terms of social equality, it seems to follow from a more basic commitment to moral equality; the “social” part, in

other words, seems to be doing very little work (*SE*, pp. 170–172). It is unclear how much work this presumption does, even if Gosepath succeeds in establishing it. On the one hand, it reduces to a mere formality if unequal distributions can be readily justified (as they often should be, e.g., with medical care). On the other hand, if one inflates the argumentative burden needed to justify any form of inequality, then the presumption has radical implications. This is the path taken by Ackerman (1980) and Goodwin (2005).⁹

In contrast, Fabian Schuppert seeks “to analyse what kind of relationships social egalitarians should deem (in)compatible with the ideal of social equality and for which reasons” (*SE*, p. 108). Following Scheffler, Schuppert holds that “social equality is necessary for properly protecting people’s free and responsible agency” (*SE*, p. 110). But whereas Scheffler embodies this constraint in terms of the processes of decision making a society employs, Schuppert believes the constraint must be embodied directly in social relations. Thus, he concludes that “social egalitarians want to protect people’s free and responsible agency, which leads them to worry about unequal social relationships and their possible negative consequences on people’s agency” (*SE*, p. 111). He then examines how this constraint may affect workplace relationships, rich-poor relationships, and gender relationships. Of these, Schuppert’s first example (workplace relationships) is the most-developed, while the treatment of gender-based relationships comes across as a bit perfunctory.

Some social egalitarians identify specific individuals or traditions as sources for developing a defensible social egalitarianism. Marie Garrau and Cécile Laborde, for example, look to republicanism. Social egalitarians, they argue, differ from distributive egalitarians (particularly luck egalitarians) in four important ways: “they insist on the importance of equal access to nonmaterial goods; they underline the expressive nature of political institutions; they argue that the achievement of equality requires a democratic ethos; and...they draw attention to the structure of social relationships” (*SE*, pp. 47–48). Republicans, with their focus upon the achievement of nondomination (at least in the forms of republicanism associated with Philip Pettit), also do all of these things, and so for Garrau and Laborde, “republicanism is a paradigmatic relational theory of equality” (*SE*, p. 45). But Garrau and Laborde argue that it is vulnerability, not simply domination, that can compromise relational equality. Pettit et al. therefore miss forms of vulnerability that are nonrelational in nature. The nature of these forms is not clearly spelled out by Garrau and Laborde, but more importantly the precise contribution intended by Garrau and Laborde remains unclear. If they believe that a focus upon vulnerability is the most effective way to articulate a theory of social equality, they might do better to make articulating such a theory their primary focus, rather than detour through the merits and demerits of republicanism.

It is unclear whether the focus upon nondomination is specifically republican in nature. Christian Schemmel, for example, argues that “justice-based relational egalitarians” should “seek to identify a distinctive set of inequalitarian relationships as primary injustice, seizing especially on domination as the core unjust relation to be ruled out” (*SE*, p. 154). Schemmel sees no conflict between this focus upon nondomination and liberalism—to the contrary, he believes that liberal social egalitarians should place nondomination front and centre. Moreover, Miranda Fricker describes nondomination as a “liberal value” (*TES*, p. 85). But it is Lucy Allais’ paper that goes the furthest in this respect. On the one hand, she seeks to develop “the conception of equality contained in Kant’s political philosophy” (*TES*, 185).

⁹ For critiques of Ackerman’s approach, see Regan (1983) and Stone (2007). For a critique of Goodwin, see Stone (2013).

This conception, she believes, is socially egalitarian in nature, in that it is concerned “not with an even distribution, but with what it is to treat people as equals and with respect” (*TES*, p. 199). On the other hand, Allais places a concern with nondomination at the heart of Kant’s political philosophy. For Kant, she writes, “Justice is necessary for humans to live together in relations of non-domination: to live together in such a way that individuals’ purposive agency is not systematically subject to the arbitrary choices...of other individuals” (*TES*, p. 200). Allais associates her account with a “republican” reading of Kant (*TES*, p. 185), but it is hard to imagine any account of Kant’s political philosophy which denied him a central place in the “high liberal” tradition—a tradition which leads quite naturally to Rawls (Freeman 2001, p. 106). Again, this raises the question of whether invoking the liberalism-republicanism distinction here is at all useful.

Rawls has played a major role not only in setting the terms of contemporary debates regarding egalitarianism. He is also responsible for setting certain concepts at the heart of these debates. One of the most important of these concepts is *respect*. For Rawls, the social basis of self-respect numbers among the primary goods that a just society must distribute correctly. This concern with respect is echoed in several papers. Carina Fourie considers “the normative status of inequalities of social status based on esteem” (*SE*, p. 87). Fourie follows Runciman (1967) in distinguishing between respect (sometimes called recognition respect), which is owed equally to all persons, and esteem (sometimes called appraisal respect), which may be distributed unequally based upon people’s qualities and achievements (cf. Darwall 1977). Fourie seeks to problematize this dichotomy by investigating ways that hierarchies of esteem can still create difficulties for social egalitarianism. It could be very hard, for example, to enjoy respect in a society with few possible paths of esteem, none of which are realistically open to you (*SE*, pp. 99–101). This point is reasonable as far as it goes, but it is easy to take it too far. Fourie may be doing this when fretting that “It is possible that for those unlucky enough to have very few talents, pluralism may prompt even greater damage to their sense of self-worth than in a less diverse society, as they find they fail at almost everything, and there are so many very [different] things at which to fail” (*SE*, p. 101). But this takes Fourie far down the path condemned by Elizabeth Anderson, when she chided academic egalitarians for singling out “the lazy and irresponsible” for special attention (Anderson 1999, P. 288). It was that condemnation that in part led Anderson to formulate her own conception of social egalitarianism, and it is a lesson social egalitarians should not unlearn.

Central to Rawls’ thought is a distinction between justice—defined as the first virtue of social institutions (Rawls 1999b, p. 3)—and morality or rightness more generally. This distinction is a characteristically liberal one, in which the rules used by individuals in their daily lives (the private) are importantly different from the rules governing the basic structure of society that those individuals share (the public). Egalitarians in general, and social egalitarians in particular, are concerned with this distinction. Some follow Rawls in recognizing no conflict between justice and social egalitarianism. Christian Schemmel, for example, argues that a “liberal justice-based relational equality,” which recognizes social equality as the central commitment of justice, is superior to a “pluralist social egalitarianism,” which sees social equality as a distinct and potentially competing commitment from justice (*SE*, ch. 7; cf. Miller 1997).

Other social egalitarians, however, are more comfortable with a social egalitarianism transcending the boundary between justice and morality. At the same time, they sometimes

shift this boundary as they confront it, redefining “justice” in ways unrelated to Rawls. Andrew Mason, for example, argues (plausibly) that people can show disrespect in ways incompatible with social equality without violating the demands of justice. They do this, for example, if they cease shopping at a particular store simply because the personnel employed by that store are of a different race or ethnicity (*SE*, p. 132). At the same time, Mason also redefines justice in non-Rawlsian terms; “a person’s behaviour,” he claims, “comes within the purview of justice only if it advantages or disadvantages another or, at least, is intended to do so” (*SE*, p. 131). This definition does not serve any clear analytical purpose, and Mason admits that its primary justification is to fit with ordinary-language uses of the term. It is not clear to me that this approach to defining justice offers any advance over that of Rawls.

Rawls not only distinguished between justice and morality more generally. He also distinguished between domestic and international justice, and argued for the distinctiveness of the principles associated with each (Rawls 1999a). This distinction, like the distinction between justice and morality, is much contested, with many Rawlsians disagreeing with Rawls on this point (e.g., Beitz 1999). Rekha Nath (*SE*, ch. 9), in a manner similar to Rawls’ critics, resists effort to confine social egalitarianism to the domestic level. She argues that “if demands of social equality can arise in the context of the state, then they can arise out of that context” (*SE*, p. 187). In making this case, Nath follows those Rawlsians who resist drawing a bright line between the domestic and the global, recognizing shades of interconnection in between (cf. Cohen and Sabel 2006).¹⁰ There is much to be said for this path, although Nath’s strategy for doing so has its weaknesses. She argues that “the unequal relations that social egalitarians oppose all exhibit a hierarchical character” (*SE*, p. 189). Even assuming this is the correct way to characterize social egalitarianism at the domestic level, it is questionable that the features Nath finds objectionable on the global level—unequal bargaining power in establishing terms of trade, for example (*SE*, pp. 197–198)—can be characterized in terms of hierarchies.

Another Rawlsian distinction critiqued by many egalitarians is that between *ideal theory* and *nonideal theory*. Often this rejection is done in the name of *methodological negativism*, which holds that:

it is often, or even always, more theoretically illuminating to begin by analysing a negative social condition—e.g. injustice, inequality, disadvantage, oppression—and then draw normative conclusions about what should be done about it, than to begin by describing a positive social condition—e.g., justice, equality, inclusion—and conceive of negative conditions derivatively, as the lack of a positive (*TES*, p. 3).¹¹

For some egalitarians, this methodological negativism leads directly to a rejection of ideal theory. This is the position of Jonathan Wolff (noted before), who believes that “attempting to describe the ideal society would be a serious methodological error” (*TES*, p. 3). Wolff

¹⁰ In his preface to *Social Equality*, David Miller also notes the possibility that social egalitarianism could “be extended transnationally or even globally” (*SE*, pp. viii–ix).

¹¹ The idea of methodological negativism apparently originated with the Frankfurt School, drawing upon certain ideas in Marx (*SE*, pp. 209–210). But the analytical political philosophers moving towards this position appear to have largely rediscovered it independent of the critical theory tradition. Hull sees “further opportunities for cross-fertilization” in this “methodological convergence” (*TES*, pp. 12–13).

goes so far as to suggest (“mischievously”) the replacement of the terms “nonideal theory” and “ideal theory” with “real-world political philosophy” and “unreal political philosophy” (*TES*, p. 22).

Other egalitarians, however, do not believe that “ideal theory is fundamentally wrong-headed;” they believe instead “that it needs supplementing with analysis of negative social conditions if it is to be complete or practically relevant” (*TES*, p. 3). This position is expressed in Charles W. Mills’ paper on “Racial Equality.”¹² As Mills points out, “Rawls’s principles of justice...are principles for his well-ordered society. They are not principles of justice for our own societies, or principles of justice meant to guide us (directly) in the *transition* from actual societies to our own.” Such transitional principles are needed because contemporary western societies are, not well-ordered, but ill-ordered—“they are rich Western or Western-implanted societies, with resources quite ample, whose white citizenry refuse to share fairly with people of color not because of innate character defects but their racist socialization and their racial group interests” (emphasis in original; *TES*, p. 59). As a result, “what we need is a theorization of ill-ordered societies to complement the theorization of well-ordered societies...thus enabling us to chart a path for getting from one to the other” (*TES*, p. 60). Mills then proposes a number of principles suitable for guiding the transition from ill-ordered to well-ordered societies, although (as he acknowledges) his proposal is quite brief and tentative. Daryl Glaser demonstrates a similar concern with the path to a just (egalitarian) society. He argues that even a substantial programme aimed at distributive justice cannot “supersede or subsume the demands of corrective justice”—a position of obvious relevance to Glaser’s South Africa, or the United States for that matter (*TES*, p. 247).

None of this is meant to suggest, of course, that all egalitarians are closeted Rawlsians, even in the most abstract sense. Many egalitarians take strong stands against a broadly Rawlsian position. A good example of this is John Baker’s “Conceptions and Dimensions of Social Equality” (*SE*, ch. 3). Baker distinguishes between liberal and radical conceptions of social egalitarianism and offers a brief for the latter, illustrating the distinction by reference to three dimensions of social life: respect and recognition; love, care, and solidarity; and power. Baker takes Rawls as a paradigmatic liberal social egalitarian who illustrates well the conception Baker wishes to reject. But the distinction Baker wishes to draw between liberal and radical conceptions of social equality is not always clearcut. Baker admits that “even the set of weaker interpretations that I characterize as liberal-egalitarian implies the need for significant social change” (*SE*, p. 66). Moreover, he is cagey about whether his radical conception really eliminates inequalities completely; his radical approach to respect and recognition, for example, “seeks to eliminate, or at least to *place much more severe constraints on*, inequality of esteem” (emphasis added; *SE*, p. 69). This turns the difference between liberal and radical conceptions into one of degree, not of kind (*SE*, p. 66, n. 3).

Most of the papers in the two collections are deeply theoretical; some, however, focus more upon egalitarianism in practice. This is particularly true in *The Equal Society*, which devotes most of its second half to the topic (*TES*, Part II). David Bilchitz, for example, considers the question of including socio-economic rights in constitutions. He argues for a “two-tier” theory of distributive justice, in which one tier guarantees certain social minima to all citizens while the second tier allows for substantive inequalities (*TES*, p. 236). When constitutions enshrine this two-tier approach—which effectively means granting the first tier a constitutionally-protected status—the role of courts is “to place constraints upon the

¹² Fricker takes a similar position, although hers is harder to categorize.

distributions that can result from democratic decision-making but not fully determine those distributions (*TES*, p. 239). Ann Cudd considers the demands social egalitarianism imposes upon higher education. She articulates “three social ideals that ought to motivate society to invest in and structure higher education” (*TES*, p. 273). She then examines the implications of these ideals for the U.S. higher education system, with a focus (interestingly enough) not on the elite universities but on the near-elite ones. And Pierre-Yves Néron contends that “a commitment to social equality requires a more democratic functioning of economic organizations” (*TES*, p. 311).¹³ Néron follows Rawls in recognizing justice (interpreted as social equality) as a virtue of the basic structure of society; he simply argues that the structures of large corporations count as part of this structure. Social egalitarians, he argues, “must circumvent a classical view of corporations as being private associations” (*TES*, p. 315). Néron musters an impressive case in favour of this circumvention, and the case he builds for workplace democracy is thus quite compelling.

The shadow of Rawls certainly hangs over these efforts at applied egalitarianism. Bilchitz, for example, explicitly acknowledges Rawls (*TES*, p. 238), and his two-tier approach echoes the four-stage sequences whereby Rawls believes conceptions of justice should be applied to societies (Rawls 1999b, §31). Gina Shouten’s paper engages more explicitly with Rawls. She examines the question whether policies aimed at challenging a gendered-division of labor (GDL) can be justified within the framework of political liberalism (*TES*, ch. 13). Her skeptical take on the subject is somewhat surprising, as most Rawlsians would answer the question with an unequivocal “yes.” Moreover, she seems to impose a high burden of proof upon political liberalism, to the point that she seems to desire a negative answer to her question. This is puzzling, as it suggests Shouten wishes to tout some radical alternative to Rawls, à la Baker, but this is a move she nowhere makes.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that there are approaches to egalitarian thought that operate completely outside Rawls’ influence. Thaddeus Metz’s paper, for example, raises an important question: “What might egalitarianism look like if it were derived not from a familiar moral principle such as utilitarianism or Kantianism [or Rawlsianism, for that matter], but rather one informed by another, sub-Saharan African tradition” (*TES*, p. 203)? Metz draws primarily upon the traditions of southern Africa, although he contends that the egalitarianism he advocates would seem “familiar and attractive” to “many, if not most, peoples below the Sahara” (*TES*, p. 204). Metz’s expounds this egalitarianism via an analysis of a southern African maxim: “A person is a person through other persons” (*TES*, p. 205). This maxim, properly interpreted, forms the core of a communitarian ethics that Metz contrasts to the leading strains of Western egalitarian thought, including that of Rawls (*TES*, pp. 212, 216). Metz’s analysis of this maxim is fascinating, but it is unclear to me how far this maxim takes us from the Western tradition. Communitarianism, after all, is no stranger to that tradition (e.g., Bell 1993). Moreover, the principles Metz derives from his African form of communitarianism—a “strong *pro tanto* justification for two sorts of economic inequality, roughly, equal chances at positions such as education and jobs, on the one hand, and at possessions such as money, personal property and services, on the other”—should seem familiar to any liberal thinker, including a Rawlsian (*TES*, p. 209).¹⁴ Perhaps Metz’s African egalitarianism is not as alien to the Western tradition as he suggests.

¹³ Cf. Schuppert’s analysis of workplace relations from a social egalitarian perspective (*SE*, §5.2.1).

¹⁴ Metz at one point suggests that social egalitarianism in the West does “a poor job of accounting for equal opportunity to obtain an education as a requirement of justice” (*TES*, p. 210). This is an odd claim, given the

There is much more that could be said about both *Social Equality* and *The Equal Society*. Both volumes offer challenging contributions to contemporary debates regarding egalitarianism. I have tried my best to make plain the value of those contributions. But I have also urged egalitarians to revisit Rawls even as they grapple with new contributions such as these. That method, I believe, is the one most likely to generate further advances. One step backwards, two steps forward.¹⁵

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centrality of equality of opportunity to the Western liberal tradition.

¹⁵ An early draft of this essay was presented at the All-Ireland Political Theory Seminar Series. I would like to thank the participants at that meeting—particularly Showkat Ali, Keith Breen, Pietro Intropi, Cillian McBride, Marie Moran, Adina Preda, Andrew Shorten, and Jesse Spafford—as well as John Baker for their helpful comments and suggestions.

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