



# **Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality**

*Ronald Dworkin*

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Equality is the endangered species of political ideals. Even left-of-center politicians reject equality as an ideal: government must combat poverty, they say, but need not strive that its citizens be equal in any dimension. In his new book Ronald Dworkin insists, to the contrary, that equality is the indispensable virtue of democratic sovereignty. A legitimate government must treat all its citizens as equals, that is, with equal respect and concern, and, since the economic distribution that any society achieves is mainly the consequence of its system of law and policy, that requirement imposes serious egalitarian constraints on that distribution.

What distribution of a nation's wealth is demanded by equal concern for all? Dworkin draws upon two fundamental humanist principles--first, it is of equal objective importance that all human lives flourish, and second, each person is responsible for defining and achieving the flourishing of his or her own life--to ground his well-known thesis that true equality means equality in the value of the resources that each person commands, not in the success he or she achieves. Equality, freedom, and individual responsibility are therefore not in conflict, but flow from and into one another as facets of the same humanist conception of life and politics. Since no abstract political theory can be understood except in the context of actual and complex political issues, Dworkin develops his thesis by applying it to heated contemporary controversies about the distribution of health care, unemployment benefits, campaign finance reform, affirmative action, assisted suicide, and genetic engineering.

## **Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality Details**

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# From Reader Review Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality for online ebook

**Aaron Crofut says**

Dworkin attempts to tackle two fairly large questions in this book: is equality an important value, and is it possible? The first kind of gets glanced over, but for the first hundred pages he makes a pretty concerted effort on the second question. Despite disagreeing with him, he earned a lot of respect from me in that first quarter of the book, not ignoring the existence of challenges and coming up with a novel and interesting idea of creating equality on a pseudo-Crusoe economy by auctioning them off. He focuses on equality of resources rather than equality of welfare (effectively, happiness), mostly because we can be pretty sure that we can redistribute resources but not the latter.

But the effort ultimately falls flat, and in a rather irritating way. Dworkin, despite his ability to see problems, is unwilling to let them interfere with his conclusion.

The main virtue in this theory is Envy; this is no exaggeration, as he calls the standard by which we'll know if things are distributed fairly the "envy test." The initial auction of magically appearing goods sounds legitimate, but is not realistic outside of this very unique situation. Could we create equality of resources in our society today? Sure, but as Nozick pointed out, you can't keep it that way for more than a second before inequality settles back in, and here Dworkin falls apart. On the one hand, we can't let people become unequal without betraying the main point, but on the other hand, we can't reward the indolent and punish the productive without imploding the economy, to say nothing of the justice of such a policy. Dworkin tries to wriggle out of this by saying we won't constantly update equality, but over the long term we'll enforce it. Furthermore, we'll only redistribute the difference in ability between people (which he ascribes to unfair luck), but we'll keep the inequality between lack of effort.

To which I can only ask, how? We get answers like "we'll feed it into a computer" and "a battery of new tests to discover latent talent" and "just because we can't do this now doesn't mean we should rule it out as a possibility." Which is all horsecrap not actually answering the problems. You can't even out a person's resources over a lifetime if you don't know how long that lifetime will be; a person who toils more but dies before the reset is cheated, while the glutton of leisure does the same if he kicks off before the reset. Since we don't know when/how this will work, it's pretty hard to conclude that it'll work, much less base the rest of the book (including policy positions for our current government) on such a thin straw.

Ultimately, this book becomes what a Dworkin Dictatorship would look like. At no point do we hear him say "most reasonable people would disagree with my opinion on this." This is important, because the "reasonable people" analysis (which aligns with his own beliefs 100%) is used a standard to justify imposing various economic decisions on people, like buying insurance for various outcomes.

Inevitably, this conflicts with the common notion of liberty, so Dworkin tosses it as being incompatible with his view of equality. "Real" liberty amounts to accepting restrictions to jam one into an equal position with everyone else.

This was where I quit, with just a smattering of skimming into his policy positions in section 2. Liberty as Nozick and Mill understood it has done an incredible job of maintaining civil society and encouraging economic growth. It does not fit in Dworkin's world, but that's because the Classical Liberal Liberty had to grow up among real people in the real world. Dworkin's theory doesn't even work in Dworkinland without

some serious hand waving and magical spells.

The man saw the problems. Equality of happiness can't be done, because that term is too nebulous to quantitative. Equality of resources allows some aspects to be (temporarily) equalized (namely, money), but even then important aspects like skill, talent, experience, connections, physical attributes, and a host of other things cannot be redistributed. Imperfect equality is called inequality, and envy won't be satisfied that way. Furthermore, this is a static imperfect equality, and within a day different people will have more or less money than others because they'll spend it at different rates. To say you'll differentiate wealth created by effort from work created by talent is pure hogwash. My respect for Dworkin would have been much higher if he just stated the problem and called on other academics to help him solve it, rather than just saying it might not be impossible to solve so we'll assume that it is possible.

So, you cannot create equality, and you couldn't keep it even if you did. This doesn't even touch on how ruinous it would be to destroy the profit motive, and long-run equality would do just that, because who knows when we're hitting the reset button. People won't save or make long-term investments in that world.

I wish my review could be clearer, but there's only so much one can do with a work like this. The book is opaque because the argument is weak, and if it was stated clearly it wouldn't even have been published. Mills, Nozick, and Mises were far more interesting, because they took people as they actually are and tried to explain their actions, rather than creating fake people unrecognizable as members of our species and trying to create Utopia among them.

For now, equality can be no more than the equality of rules, and envy remains a dangerous vice. See: Plato.

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## **Dreamersemporium says**

uncorrected proof

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## **Alessandro says**

Non ho trovato il titolo in italiano, tradotto in edizione Feltrinelli "Virtù sovrana".

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