

Is there any such thing as human equality?

If there is, it must be because of considerations such as the following:

1. All human beings have the symbolic power, in the sense of the capacity to form concepts, and thus powers of speech, picturing, map- and graph-making, musical notation, dramatic imitation, and so on.
2. All human beings are capable of value^{judgments,} including moral, judgments and hence all have the right to adopt their own values or ideals.
3. All human beings are capable of participating in political decisions.
4. All human beings, so far as can be told at birth, have the same inborn mental and moral capacities and thus are capable of the same achievements given the same opportunities.

But do such considerations really establish anything like strict and universal human equality?

No, because we cannot possibly avoid making exceptions and qualifications of all of them. There are, after all, imbeciles and morons as well as those who appear to lack any moral sense at all. Nor does anyone ask for political equality for either the insane or infants, or even children.

But, then, what is left? What is left are some very important and valid senses in which human beings may be said to be equal. Consider the following:

1. Large groups of persons classified according to physical traits having no known relation to inborn mental and moral capacities—traits such as race and gender—are to be presumed virtually equal in such capacities and thus in essential human worth. Why? Because differences in opportunity and incentive suffice—for all anyone has shown to the contrary—to explain differences in achievement, and because the really drastic differences in achievement are all between individuals, regardless of race or gender.

2. Any society based on persuasion more than on force must see to it that its individual members are all treated with respect. Normal adult human beings are all capable of participating in the political process and should be enabled to do so, both formatively, at the level of constituent sovereignty, and substantively, at the level of governance under a constitution.

3. Whatever the differences of worth between normal human adults, it is impractical to try to take account of all of them either socially or politically. On how many different dimensions—of skill, intelligence, virtue, potentiality for transcending habits, and so on—can people be compared? And who is competent to judge the relative importance of these different dimensions or the status of different ever-changing individuals with respect to any of them? Certainly, parentage is not a reliable guide to individual gifts and merits, and intelligence tests are notoriously often misleading.

Even if such considerations fail to establish absolute equality, they surely suffice to exclude the chief forms of inegalitarianism practiced hitherto, such as racism, the subjection of women, the denial of opportunity to children of the poor, and so on. But can we say anything more?

If we're not to claim more than the evidence warrants, we must probably settle for just such a frankly relativistic view. Normal adult human beings are indeed separated by a vast, if not strictly uniform, gap from the nonhuman creatures lacking the symbolic power. And although the ability to choose ideals that goes with this power varies from one individual to another, it does not, so far as we know, vary appreciably and innately from race to race or gender to gender. Nor does size of income or any obviously physical traits or facts about parentage have anything very much to do with it.

As for Jefferson's point that human equality amounts to a common inferiority to God and a common superiority to other nonhuman creatures, it's well taken, even though it can be made more clearly and powerfully today by comparing human beings, not with the nonhuman animals of their ordinary experience, but with the cells of their own bodies that biologists take to be genuinely individual organisms. When it is said that no person can be made innately subservient to another, two things are being denied: no

human being can be to another either as a cell is to a human being or as a human being is to God. Thus theories of natural subservience or natural overlordship between reasonably normal adults are all false. All human beings normal enough to have anything like average symbolic capacity are appropriately dealt with as coparticipants in a cooperative process of conscious valuation and purposive activity. They ought to have, if not literally "equal respect" for each other, sufficient respect so that it is scarcely appropriate even to ask about a distinction. Each primarily confronts a fellow human being or rational animal, only secondarily, a superior or inferior.

(Closely following Charles Hartshorne, "Equality, Freedom, and the Insufficiency of Empiricism")

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