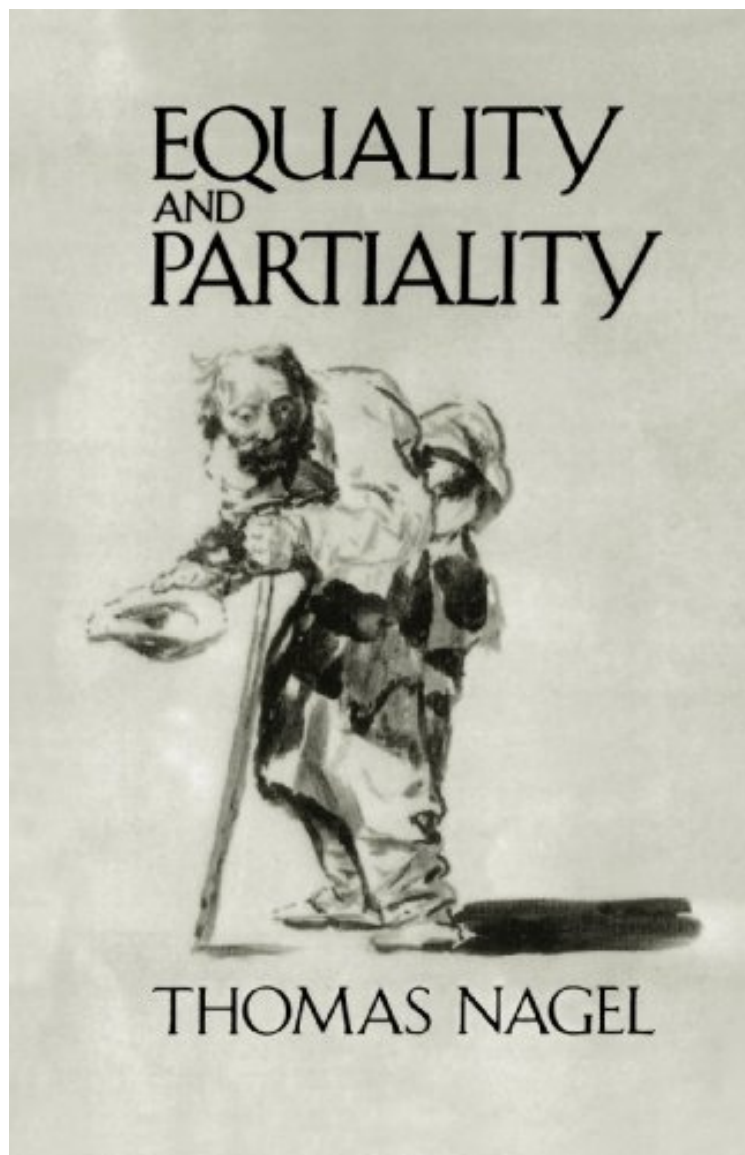


(Pdf free) Equality and Partiality

## Equality and Partiality

*Thomas Nagel*

*\*Download PDF / ePub / DOC / audiobook / ebooks*



DOWNLOAD



READ ONLINE

#1655847 in eBooks 1995-05-11 1991-08-08 File Name: B002SB9D8Y | File size: 77.Mb

**Thomas Nagel : Equality and Partiality** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Equality and Partiality:

1 of 7 people found the following review helpful. Not in the best condition- Frustrating BookBy E. WileyWe used this as a discussion piece for a philosophy club at my college. Each chapter was a teaser to the answer, then "swoosh" no answer was given. The writer did warn that there maybe no right answer to the ills of institutions and our current "democracy". But reading a whole book on ideas that won't solidify was as frustrating as getting to third base and then your Mom catches you in the act.1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. SHOULD OUR SOCIETY

ENCOURAGE ECONOMIC EGALITARIANISM? By Steven H Propp

Thomas Nagel (born 1937) is an American philosopher, currently University Professor of Philosophy and Law at New York University, where he has taught since 1980. He has written many other books, such as *What Does It All Mean?: A Very Short Introduction to Philosophy*, *The View From Nowhere*, *Mortal Questions*, *The Possibility of Altruism*, *The Last Word*, etc. He wrote in the Acknowledgements section of this 1991 book, "This book was written between 1987 and 1990... Some of the material was presented at the Thalheimer Lectures at Johns Hopkins in 1989, and the bulk of it was presented as the John Locke Lectures at Oxford in 1990..." He begins the Introduction, "This essay deals with what I believe to be the central problem of political theory. Rather than proposing a solution to it, I shall try to explain what it is, and why a solution is so difficult to achieve... My belief is not just that all social and political arrangements so far devised are unsatisfactory... there is a deeper problem---not merely practical, but theoretical: we do not yet possess an acceptable political ideal, for reasons which belong to moral and political philosophy." (Pg. 3) He continues, "The hardest problems of political theory are conflicts within the individual, and no external solution will be adequate which does not deal with them at their source. The impersonal standpoint in each of us produces, I shall claim, a powerful demand for universal impartiality and equality, while the personal standpoint give rise to individualistic motives and requirements which present obstacles to the pursuit and realization of such ideals." (Pg. 4) He states, "The individual point of view is not only a perspective on the facts and a causal point of contact... but a perspective of value... The ideal, then, is a set of institutions within which persons can live a collective life that meets the impartial requirements of the impersonal standpoint while at the same time having to conduct themselves only in ways that it is reasonable to require of individuals with strong personal motives." (Pg. 18) He suggests, "Impersonally considered, the ideal of eliminating inherent economic inequality is morally attractive... if people could become different so that they would support a thriving system of economic equality freely, they would thereby become not worse as individuals, but in some ways better. They would not have to submerge all their personal motives and concerns beneath a desire for the common good, but need only... give up their acquisitiveness and greatly expand their public-spiritedness and devotion to productive labor for its own sake." (Pg. 28-29) He explains, "The impartial attitude is, I believe, strongly egalitarian both in itself and in its implications. As I have said, it comes from our capacity to take up a point of view which abstracts from who we are, but which appreciates fully and takes to heart the value of every person's life and welfare. We put ourselves in each person's shoes and take as our preliminary guide to the value we assign to what happens to him the value which it has from his point of view. This gives to each person's well-being very great importance, and from the impersonal standpoint everyone's primary importance, leaving aside his effect on the welfare of others, is the same." (Pg. 64-65) He admits, "I believe there may be cases in which no legitimate solution to the problem of conflicting interests is available, so that parties are reduced to trying to impose their personally preferred solution by whatever power they may be able to muster---against the reasonable opposition of their opponents." (Pg. 81) He argues, "an egalitarian system would have to completely forget the idea... that the root of social injustice is exploitation---in the sense of a failure to reward people in accordance with their productive contributions or the true value of their labor. The defense of equality requires that rewards not depend on productive contribution, and in particular that some people receive much more of the social product than they contribute. People's productive contributions are no unequal that the mere avoidance of exploitation would allow great inequalities of economic condition." (Pg. 99) He also asserts, "For some reason it appears to be harder to internalize the sense that advantages derived from the exercise of talent are in themselves morally suspect, on the ground that talent itself is a matter of luck... It is true, of course that your talents are an intimate part of you, and that any attempt by the state to prevent you from exercising and developing them would be intolerable... But the economic rewards which some talents are able to command, if properly developed, are another story. They cannot be said to be merited just because the recognition of excellence on which they are based is merited. To sever the connection between talent and admiration would be wrong. But to sever the connection between talent and income... would be fine." (Pg. 113) He concludes one chapter, "My conclusion ... is that a strongly egalitarian society ... [is] psychologically and politically out of reach... [But] Intolerance of severe poverty at least receives lip service ... and it ought to be possible to develop it into insistence on a higher and higher social minimum, until it becomes intolerable in a rich society if anyone does not have a decent standard of living and a fair opportunity to go as far as his natural talents will take him above that." (Pg. 128) But in another chapter he contends, "I suggest... that this may justify a society in trying to adopt economic policies that permit such extremes. As things are, these luxuries are the concomitants of earned or inherited wealth. But even if inequalities of that kind could be rationally reduced, it would be desirable to permit in some other way the enjoyment of life at its upper boundaries by a few. While there may be no ideal way to distribute such opportunities, I believe no egalitarianism can be right which would permit haute cuisine, haute couture, and exquisite houses to disappear just because not everyone can have them." (Pg. 138) Whether one always agrees with Nagel, this is a thought-provoking book of political philosophy, and will be of key interest to students of such.

16 of 18 people found the following review helpful. Must reading for libertarians and egalitarians alike.

By John S. Ryan

In this engaging and well-written volume, Thomas Nagel squeezes a good deal of political mileage out of his perpetual distinction between the personal and impersonal points of view. Here he finds a difficulty striking the right balance between -- as his title suggests --

equality and partiality. His contention is that when I abstract from my pursuit of my own values, I am able to see myself as just one person among others and recognize that -- in an absolute, view-from-nowhere sense -- other persons are just as "important" as I am. Thus arises a conflict within myself between the "personal" and "impersonal" points of view -- or between partiality toward my own values and interests, on the one hand, and impartiality, on the other. Nagel is careful to note that he is *not* arguing against personality/partiality altogether. On the contrary, he thinks there is an important place in the world for purely agent-relative values. He just doesn't think that's all there are. Nor is he primarily interested in drawing conclusions; his main concern is to try to set out the issues clearly. And at any rate, his main (tentative) conclusion is the comparatively tame one that it is possible and desirable to establish social institutions which provide a guaranteed minimal level of well-being to everyone. (I entirely agree that this would be a Good Thing, assuming that I am allowed to construe "social institutions" in the broadest possible fashion. But it is a long leap from "not, strictly speaking, morally optional" to "properly mandated by the positive law of the State," and I do not see that Nagel makes that leap any more effectively than Alan Gewirth.) And although he follows Parfit in giving the greatest weight to improvements for the worst off, he is not in favor of forcibly "equalizing" everybody in a Harrison-Bergeron sort of way. (But don't worry; libertarians will find plenty to disagree with all the same.) The heart of his case is the alleged conflict between personal and impersonal viewpoints. I take it that he thinks some, but not all, of our "personal" values will survive the transition to the "impersonal" point of view. The ones that survive this transition are, roughly, the ones it might be okay to tax people in support of. Now, frankly, Nagel's perceived difficulty seems to arise from a miscasting of the problem. On the one hand, surely all values are "agent-relative" in the minimal sense that (a) every value depends (as Nagel himself admits) on the existence of at least one valuing agent, and (b) every intrinsic value is realized or actualized in someone's experience. (I am not sure whether Nagel follows W.D. Ross, as I do, in holding that all intrinsic goods are states of mind or relations between them.) On the other hand, surely there is also an "impartial" point of view from which we can see, and say, that (other things equal) the fulfillment of agent-relative values is simply *good*, period. In this sense, even the most irreducibly personal (and otherwise unproblematic) value is *also* an "impersonal" value which any rational agent can see to be, *ceteris paribus*, worth fulfilling for its own sake -- i.e., an intrinsic good. In that case the "personal-ness" of a value is strictly a matter of degree; its "impersonal-ness" is not; and the two are not even contraries, let alone mutually exclusive. If that is right, then the real problem Nagel is addressing is not a conflict between agent-relative and agent-neutral values at all (his distinction between which Christine Korsgaard has criticized on other grounds in "The Reasons We Can Share," reprinted in *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*). It is the arguably more manageable problem of how individual agents are to set priorities among their values (including those they ideally should have). Which raises the corollary question of how far individual agents become *responsible* for one another's well-being simply through the rational insight that such well-being is "good, period." For *ceteris* is seldom *paribus*, and it is just not the case that insight into an intrinsic good necessarily imposes an obligation on the possessor of the insight. It is obviously possible to recognize the intrinsic goodness of a past event without thereby becoming obliged to bring about what has, after all, already occurred. It is also possible to recognize the intrinsic goodness (or otherwise) of a possible future event without thereby obliging oneself to make it happen (or prevent it); even if this is a *prima facie* duty, it is easily overruled. Your trip to the dentist will no doubt produce some pain (an intrinsic evil), but you are not therefore obliged to refrain from going; still less am I obliged to prevent you. And without sorting through the messy matter of personal responsibility, we cannot simply conclude that the "impersonal" point of view imposes any particular obligations on particular persons. But I don't think Nagel quite comes to grips with the question of personal responsibility/duty, and I suspect this is because, as Korsgaard notes, he is really a "consequentialist" rather than a Kantian: he thinks ethics is for the sole purpose of *bringing about some overall result*. If this view is denied, and especially if his distinction between "personal" and "impersonal" values is also found wanting, then his argument is an extended *ignoratio elenchi*. There are other difficulties: for example, his Rawlsian contention that people do not "deserve" their talents, the difficulty or impossibility of meaningfully measuring equality of outcome, and the fact that so much of his discussion takes place at the level of the "collective." But space will not permit discussion of those. In any case, though, I agree with reviewer Chris Cathcart (below) that Nagel's work should be read by political theorists of all stripes. The problems he raises are real, whether his formulation of them is ultimately satisfactory or not. And frankly, few volumes from the libertarian camp display Nagel's intellectual honesty, clarity, and nuance.

Derived from Thomas Nagel's Locke Lectures, *Equality and Partiality* proposes a nonutopian account of political legitimacy, based on the need to accommodate both personal and impersonal motives in any credible moral theory, and therefore in any political theory with a moral foundation. Within each individual, Nagel believes, there is a division between two standpoints, the personal and the impersonal. Without the impersonal standpoint, there would be no morality, only the clash, compromise, and occasional convergence of individual perspectives. It is because a human being does not occupy only his own point of view that each of us is susceptible to the claims of others through private and public morality. Political systems, to be legitimate, must achieve an integration of these two standpoints within the individual. These ideas are applied to specific problems such as social and economic inequality, toleration,

international justice, and the public support of culture. Nagel points to the problem of balancing equality and partiality as the most important issue with which political theorists are now faced.

"There is much in this short and illuminating book to stimulate serious thought about a wide range of issues in contemporary political theory. Nagel's style is deceptively simple, masking an unusual depth and complexity of view....For those who have read widely in the recent literature of political philosophy, it is a rare treat."--American Political Science "A clear, sometimes subtle, and elegant book."--Society"Thomas Nagel is just about the most interesting philosopher of our day. Without descending to rhetorical tricks, he conveys a wonderful sense of the urgency of the issues he writes about....[Nagel's] deftness of touch and delicacy of intellectual imagination are exactly what the subject demands."--Times Literary Supplement"[Nagel] is focused on the right issues, and his discussion of them is both lucid and illuminating. The book is certainly required reading for those working in the area of political philosophy."--The of Politics"On all these subjects [Nagel discusses] we get tough-minded, honest, insightful, imaginative thought expressed in lucid prose, fully accessible to the nonprofessional, and clearly relevant to the most important political issues of our time. In a more rational world this book would have the best-seller status that Allen Bloom's had."--Philosophical From the Back CoverDerived from Thomas Nagel's 1990 Locke Lectures, Equality and Partiality proposes that ethics, and the ethical basis of political theory, have to be understood as arising from the division between two standpoints, the personal and the impersonal.About the AuthorThomas Nagel's previous Oxford books are: The View from Nowhere (1989), which sold nearly 4000 copies and What Does It All Mean? (1988, paperback 1989) which sold a total of nearly 11,000 copies.