

EQUALITY, SUFFICIENCY, DECENCY: THREE CRITERIA OF ECONOMIC JUSTICE

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ABSTRACT: Among the world's poor and downtrodden are people who live under conditions of injustice and economic inequality. A *prima facie* plausible proposed solution to the problem of injustice is to fight it with principles of equality and sufficiency. Stephan Nathanson takes a hard look at such proposed solutions and finds them seriously lacking. He maintains that if one is disturbed by disparities in wealth and is attracted to egalitarian conceptions of justice, one should think again. He defends instead the idea that there is a minimum level of "decency" that should be promoted worldwide, but not to the exclusion of justified economic disparity.



any people are moved to embrace egalitarian ideals by the vast disparities in resources and well-being among people. While some possess enough resources to satisfy costly but trivial desires, many others lack the basic resources for survival and health. This strikes many people as unjust. Thomas Nagel has given eloquent expression to this reaction in his book *Equality and Partiality*. He writes:

[I]t is appalling that the most effective social systems we have been able to devise permit so many people to be born into conditions of harsh deprivation which crush their prospects for leading a decent life, while many others are well provided for from birth . . . and are free to enjoy advantages vastly beyond the conditions of mere decency.¹

Confronted by these harsh disparities, many people—Nagel included—conclude that since it is inequalities that trigger their sense of injustice, then the cure for injustice is equality.

I believe that the ideal of equality is open to serious objections and that people who care about justice must find other ways to articulate their concerns and their goals. In this paper, I will criticize the egalitarian view and consider

two alternatives: the “sufficiency” criterion and the “decent level” view. I will defend the “decent level” view as the best account of economic justice and the best goal for those who seek a just society.

My arguments in this paper are addressed to people who are disturbed by disparities in wealth and are attracted by the egalitarian conception of justice. I do not address the concerns of libertarian thinkers who champion a market economy and are untroubled by large disparities in income and well-being.²

THE EGALITARIAN VIEW

According to Amartya Sen, every reasonable moral/political theory is an egalitarian theory. Therefore, the real question is not “*whether* equality?” but rather “equality of what?”—*what* should be distributed equally?³ While I share many of Sen’s concerns, I believe that this central claim is mistaken. My view is that virtually no one is an egalitarian and that the language of equality is an obstacle to achieving what many egalitarians actually want.

Before criticizing Sen’s claim, it is worth noting what makes it attractive. Sen argues that many thinkers who seem hostile to equality are actually committed to it. Libertarians like Robert Nozick accept large *economic* inequalities, for example, but insist that everyone has an equal right to be free from coercion and interference.⁴ Similarly, those utilitarians who defend inequalities of wealth still claim to be counting everyone’s well-being equally.⁵

Sen’s strategy is appealing. If all plausible theories are egalitarian, then egalitarians do not need to defend equality; they can shift the discussion to “equality of what?” Nonetheless, his claim creates confusion. As Sen himself notes, people who are egalitarians with respect to a particular good are necessarily anti-egalitarian with respect to others.⁶ Libertarians may be egalitarians with respect to basic negative rights, but they are anti-egalitarian with respect to virtually everything else. It invites confusion to label a view “egalitarian” when it is egalitarian in some limited respect but anti-egalitarian in many others.

Such confusions are common. Many call Rawls an egalitarian, even though his difference principle is a defense of economic and social *inequalities*.⁷ It says that people should reject economic equality when permitting inequalities will generate benefits for the least well off. While Rawls is an egalitarian with respect to formal political and legal rights, he is not an egalitarian with respect to economic resources. Similarly, Michael Walzer, in *Spheres of Justice*, calls his own ideal “complex equality.”⁸ But, since Walzer’s view of justice permits inequalities with respect to virtually every good, there is no reason to call it “complex equality” rather than “complex inequality.” This point applies to many so-called egalitarian thinkers.⁹

AGAINST EQUALITY

Equality is actually a dubious ideal. Many inequalities are unobjectionable, and virtually no one wants to get rid of them. Virtually everyone believes, for example,

that it is morally permissible, even obligatory, for people to devote unequal amounts of time, affection, and resources to their own family members, friends, neighbors, clients, students, etc. If distributing everything equally were required by justice, these practices would be impermissible.¹⁰

A second, familiar objection—the “leveling down” argument—notes that one way to achieve equality is to reduce everyone to the level of those who are badly off.¹¹ If we cannot cure all who are ill, for example, we could make everyone equally sick. Yet no one favors this, not even people who advocate equality. The real value of Sen’s question “equality of what?” is this. If “equality of everything” is a goal that no one wants, then egalitarians need to specify the good(s) *with respect to which* they favor equality.¹² Without that specification, the goal of equality is self-refuting because, as we have seen, equality along one dimension necessitates inequality along others.¹³ But beyond this need for specification, it is important to see that in many areas, justice does not require equality.

ECONOMIC EGALITARIANISM

I want now to focus on economic equality. Does economic justice require economic equality?

For the sake of discussion, I take economic egalitarianism to be the view that each person should have an equal annual income and that unequal accumulations of resources should not be permitted. This is the view defended by the American socialist Edward Bellamy in his novel *Looking Backward*. Not all egalitarians accept this proposal, but it provides a clear, straightforward version of economic equality.¹⁴ So, the question is whether we should be economic egalitarians in this sense.

I will briefly consider this question by reference to three values that are central to assessments of economic institutions: *maximization of well-being*, *rewarding of desert*, and *promotion of liberty*. Each of these values is prominent in debates about economic justice, and each provides a good reason for rejecting an equal distribution of resources.¹⁵

If we want to maximize well-being and if differential rewards provide incentives for greater productivity, then it makes sense to reject an equal distribution. Rawls’s argument for the difference principle is a special case of this argument, since he imagines a situation in which an equal distribution makes the least well off members of society worse off than they would be if inequalities were permitted. The claim that inequalities create incentives that raise well-being can be debated, but it is plausible, and if true, provides good reason for departing from equality.¹⁶

The same can be said about rewarding desert. It is widely believed that some people deserve greater rewards because of greater efforts or higher productivity, but equality would prohibit their having more. Again, there are debates about these matters, but the presumption for most people is that some people deserve more than others and, hence, that equality is neither required nor permitted by justice.¹⁷

Finally, maintaining an equal distribution of resources would require large-scale governmental intervention to prevent exchanges that generate inequalities. The effect on people's liberty could not help but be negative. Libertarians have made this point forcefully, as have those who emphasize the repressive character of self-described socialist regimes. If equality requires severe limits on liberty or makes tyrannical governments more likely, that is a serious strike against the goal of economic equality.¹⁸

While these three arguments show that economic equality is inconsistent with important values, they do not by themselves tell us what an economically just society would look like. If we reject the egalitarian solution, what can we put in its place?

THE "SUFFICIENCY CRITERION"

One possible alternative is the sufficiency criterion proposed by Harry Frankfurt.¹⁹ Frankfurt sets the stage for the sufficiency criterion by offering several arguments against economic equality.

He points out that people who have less than others need not be badly off. If everyone is well off but some are exceedingly wealthy, then no one suffers by virtue of having fewer resources. In such cases, he claims, there is nothing wrong with inequality. This is because there is an important difference between having *less than others* and having *less than one needs or desires*. Only in the second case is there something to be lamented, and considerations of justice enter the picture only when people's conditions are bad. As Frankfurt says, "To show [that] poverty . . . is compellingly undesirable does nothing whatsoever to show the same of inequality."²⁰

The problem with poverty, Frankfurt says, is that impoverished people lack *sufficient* resources. This makes it plausible to suppose that if people have sufficient resources, then worries about injustice are irrelevant, even if inequalities remain. The sufficiency theory focuses on the relation between what people possess and their level of well-being, while the equality doctrine mistakenly focuses on the relationship between the amount of resources possessed and the amount possessed by others.

But what exactly is a "sufficient" amount of resources. Frankfurt emphasizes that "sufficiency" should not be interpreted too minimally. "[H]aving enough money," he writes, "differs from merely having enough to . . . make life marginally tolerable."²¹

In his view, sufficiency is linked to contentment. As he notes, "[t]o say that a person has enough money means that he is content . . . with having no more money than he has."²²

So, if people are content with what they have, and if having more is inessential to their being satisfied with their lives, then the demand for ending inequalities in resources would be pointless.

PROBLEMS WITH THE SUFFICIENCY VIEW

While the sufficiency criterion seems to provide a plausible alternative to equality, it is open to a number of criticisms. I will focus on one that I take to be decisive. As Richard Arneson has noted, the sufficiency view sets no limit to a person's desires.²³ Even if most people find modest levels of resources sufficient for contentment, Frankfurt's theory makes sufficiency entirely person-relative and thus totally dependent on the extent of someone's desires. People with exorbitant desires would lack "sufficient" resources from the perspective of Frankfurt's view. Yet, satisfying these desires would appear implausible as a demand of justice. Though part of Frankfurt's reason for introducing sufficiency is to stress that people often do not want as much as others, the sufficiency criterion has to accord full status to the desires of people with insatiable appetites for resources.

This criticism is related to the problem of "expensive tastes."²⁴ If a person has abnormally costly tastes, it is absurd to think that justice requires that his desires be satisfied. This point is especially relevant when we think about implementing ideals. With limited resources, no system can give everyone whatever they want. So the idea that justice requires providing people with sufficient resources to make them content does not seem to be correct.

THE DECENT LEVEL CRITERION

Having shown the defects of equality and sufficiency, I want to defend the decent level criterion. My thesis is that while justice requires neither that all have *equal* resources nor that all have sufficient resources to make them content, it does require that, at least in affluent societies, all members have the resources required for a *decent level* of well-being. Once this standard is met, it does not matter whether others have more than a decent level. Inequality *per se* is not unjust; what is unjust is that some have much more than they need or deserve while others lack the basic resources required for a decent life. I will now briefly defend the "decent level" view by appeal to the same three values invoked earlier: well-being, desert, and liberty.

Given the phenomenon of the diminishing marginal utility of resources, it is plausible to argue that the overall well-being of a society can be increased by moving resources from those with plenty to those who lack a decent level. The money that buys luxuries or incidentals for the already well off can buy necessities for those who are badly off. Diminishing marginal utility supports redistribution, while the incentive argument mentioned earlier supports permitting inequalities to generate higher productivity. Providing a decent level for all achieves both.

Likewise, while a system that rewards people for individual effort and contribution may recognize *personal* desert, it ignores another kind of desert—the unearned *human* desert by which people deserve not to be tortured or abused and not to have their fundamental needs ignored by their society. If the decent level criterion is met, then an unequal distribution may be justifiable both in terms of individual desert

and human desert.²⁵ If people are allowed to fall below the decent level, however, then at best only one of these types of desert claims is met.

Finally, from the perspective of liberty, once people have the resources for a decent level of liberty to pursue their goals, there is no objection to a system that permits the otherwise unconstrained exchange of goods through the market or voluntary gifts. When the decent level criterion is not met, however, these liberties for some are purchased at the cost of denying others the liberty to pursue their goals.

Overall, then, a plausible case can be made for the decent level criterion based on the same values that rule out an equal distribution of economic resources.

SEN ON EQUALITY AND DECENCY

While Sen explicitly defends equality, much of his discussion actually supports the decent level view. His question “equality of what?” runs together two different questions: 1) “*what type of good* are we concerned about distributing?” and 2) “*what level or amount* of that good should be distributed to all?”

Sen calls the good that we should distribute equally “capabilities” or the “capacity to function.” In defense of capabilities, he argues that it is not enough to equalize resources because two people with the same resources may be unable to convert them into the same capability to function.²⁶ People with disabilities or very high caloric needs require more resources to generate the same amount of functioning that others can create with less. So, justice requires us to look at capacities to function and not simply amounts of resources.

What I want to stress is that Sen’s emphasis on *capabilities* is completely distinct from his insistence on *equality*. One can accept his capability theory without accepting his egalitarianism. In fact, equality is not required to combat the evils of poverty that dominate much of Sen’s work. If all had the resources to achieve a decent level of “capacity to function,” there would be no poverty and no economic injustice, even if inequalities persisted.

We can see this in Sen’s own discussion, which implicitly invokes the notion of a decent level. Sen explains poverty, for example, as a condition of having *less than what is required to function*; he does not call it a condition of having *less than others*. An inadequate income is one that provides too few capabilities. If we use income measures to determine poverty, he writes, “the relevant concept of poverty has to be inadequacy (for generating minimally acceptable capabilities).”²⁷

Earlier he defines poverty as “the failure of basic capabilities to reach certain minimally acceptable levels.”²⁸

By his own account, then, poverty consists in people’s having so few resources that they cannot function at “minimally acceptable levels.” If everyone could be brought up to an adequate or acceptable level of capabilities, then they would not be poor, even if others had more than they do. Poverty could be obliterated while inequalities remain.

Sen provides one of many examples of a thinker who explicitly defends egalitarian values but who does not actually require equality for justice. When he speaks

concretely about the nature of economic deprivation, “equality” disappears and is replaced by words like “adequate” and “acceptable.” To be poor is to have *fewer resources than one needs to function at an acceptable level*. This deprivation would end if all were at a decent level.

WHAT IS A “DECENT” LEVEL?

But what exactly is a decent level? What does the decent level criterion require? To answer, let me begin by contrasting the decent level with the sufficiency criterion. The sufficiency view provides a *psychological* criterion for determining the level of resources needed by a person. Sufficiency is determined by individual people’s desires and levels of (dis)contentment. The decent level view is a *social* criterion. It presupposes a social consensus on the level of resources needed for a decent life. Like Frankfurt, I oppose setting the level at “barely getting by.” At the same time, what is required must be independent of the strength and extent of individual people’s desires.

To make the contrast clear, consider a person without the resources to acquire food. This person cannot survive and, thus, cannot live a decent life. Suppose, for the sake of simplicity, that having enough food was regarded as a sufficient amount of resources for a decent level of well-being. Then, according to the decent level criterion, if people were provided with the required amount of food, they would be at a decent level, even if they remained discontented with life or if important personal desires were unmet. From the perspective of the decent level criterion, these further desires would not have the same status as the need for nutrition.

More generally, if there is a social consensus about what constitutes poverty and if being impoverished means lacking the resources required for a decent level of well-being, then we can see why there is a special moral urgency to bringing people out of poverty.²⁹ This urgency would attach to bringing people out of poverty in a way in which it does not attach to attaining personal contentment. The decent level captures this urgency perfectly since it labels as unjust those situations in which lack of resources condemns people to conditions that always include serious deprivations.

Because it is not a psychological criterion, the decent level view avoids the problem of “expensive tastes.” While the sufficiency theory has a problem here because the conditions for what a person is due are set by that person’s desires, the decent level view is not desire-based. It does not put all desires on the same level. Access to water, for example, is necessary for a decent life since no one can survive without it, while access to champagne is not necessary for a decent life, even if some people are terribly unhappy without it.³⁰

This is important because when we consider translating visions of economic justice into policies and institutions, we run into problems of limited resources. No system can give everyone everything they need to be happy. At the same time, especially in affluent countries, a plausible case can be made for the view that

members of a society ought to have the resources required for a decent level of well-being. Exactly what this level is, is partly determined by what is considered a serious deprivation, and partly by contingent levels of resources. The champagne lovers may be unhappy without champagne, but this lack need not be recognized both because it is not seen as a serious deprivation and because providing champagne might require denying other resources that are viewed as necessary for a decent life.

The decent level view assumes that there is some social consensus on what constitutes a decent level of well-being for people in a particular time and place. While the amount and kind of available resources varies in different times and places, some needs—such as access to food—are universal. Access to specific kinds of medical care is something that varies; many treatments that we now see as essential to a decent life were unavailable to people throughout most of human history. Likewise, we might think that a decent life in certain societies requires a telephone or nice enough clothing to apply for a job or walk down the street without people gawking or turning away in disgust. Both the conceptions of a decent life and the resource requirements for such a life vary among times and places. Nonetheless, this social consensus about these matters provides a quasi-objective test for what kinds of distribution are morally urgent.

Sen makes similar points in discussing the so-called “paradox of poverty in wealthy countries.” How, people wonder, can people in rich countries be considered poor when they have so much more than most people in poor countries? He writes:

In a country that is generally rich, more income may be needed to buy enough commodities to achieve the *same social functioning*, such as “appearing in public without shame” . . . [or] “taking part in the life of the community.” . . . While the rural Indian may have little problem appearing in public without shame with relatively modest clothing and can take part in the life of the community without a telephone or a television, the commodity requirements of these general functionings are much more demanding in a country where people standardly use a bigger basket of diverse commodities.³¹

Sen illustrates here how the resources for a decent life can vary in different settings. He also cites some plausible components of a decent life. His points link nicely with Avishai Margalit’s definition of a decent society as “one whose institutions do not humiliate people” and with Rawls’s emphasis on self-respect as a primary good.³² Though self-respect cannot be distributed, we can specify resources that are typically necessary for self-respect in a particular society. Clothing, for example, may be necessary for a decent level of social status even it is not required for warmth or physical protection.

The decent level, then, will vary in times and places, but it is socially determined and is not hostage to individual desire or temperament. While this may still seem too indefinite, it is important to see that a criterion of justice cannot be too specific. We cannot tell what a decent level is without knowing the conditions

under which people live, the needs they face, and the resources that are required for meeting these needs. The role of a theory or ideal of economic justice is to indicate what general goals we should aim to achieve, and the decent level does that. It is an error for a theory to anticipate *a priori* how these goals must play out under differing conditions.³³

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have tried to show that the decent level view achieves much of what egalitarians want while avoiding the problems that a commitment to equality creates. I do not mean to suggest that equality is never important, but it is not always the right standard, and in particular, it is not the right standard for economic justice.

My defense of the decent level criterion can perhaps be reinforced at this point by returning to the passage from Thomas Nagel that I began with. He writes:

[I]t is appalling that the most effective social systems we have been able to devise permit so many people to be born into conditions of harsh deprivation which crush their prospects for leading a decent life, while many others are well provided for from birth...and are free to enjoy advantages vastly beyond the conditions of mere decency.³⁴

While Nagel embraces equality as the solution to these problems, I hope it is clear at this point that the conditions of “harsh deprivation that crush...[many people’s] prospects for leading a decent life” would be ended if we implemented the decent level criterion. While inequalities would remain, the appalling conditions that trigger the criticisms of Nagel and other egalitarians would no longer exist.

ENDNOTES

1. Nagel, *Equality and Partiality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 64.
2. For arguments against libertarianism and a pure market economy, see my *Economic Justice* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1998).
3. Amartya Sen, *Inequality Reexamined* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 12–16. All page references to Sen’s work are to this particular work.
4. Nozick defends his view in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).
5. Peter Singer makes the useful distinction between equal consideration of interests and equal treatment; utilitarians are committed to the former but not the latter. See *Practical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 21–24.
6. Sen, p. 16.
7. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971).
8. Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Basic Books, 1983).

9. This point about Walzer's "egalitarianism" is forcefully made by Richard Arneson in "Equality," in R. Goodin and P. Pettit, eds., *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell, 1993), p. 491. For another example, see Ted Honderich, who calls the view that "we should give priority to policies whose end is to make well-off those who are badly off" (p. 47) the principle of equality. He defends this usage at the same time as he acknowledges that it does not actually call for equality. See *Violence and Equality* (New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 55–57. At pp. 35–37, Honderich notes and appears to accept criticisms of the strict equality view. Similar moves away from strict equality can be found in the writings of Thomas Nagel; see his "Equality," in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979; pp. 114, 118. See, too, Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 2, 74–76.

10. The only dissenters are extreme impersonalists. This view appears to be defended by Peter Singer in "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1972), pp. 229–244. Very few thinkers explicitly go this far, even when—as with utilitarians—their theories suggest that they ought to adopt extreme impersonalism. For an insightful discussion of the relationship between impartiality and morality, see Bernard Gert, *Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), chap. 6. For a discussion of impersonalism and partialism in the context of debates concerning patriotism, see my, *Patriotism, Morality, and Peace* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1993); chap. 13 contains a discussion and criticism of Singer's essay.

11. This leveling possibility is harshly satirized in Kurt Vonnegut's story "Harrison Bergeron," originally published in *Welcome to the Monkey House* (New York: Delacorte, 1961), reprinted in Louis Pojman and Robert Westmoreland, eds., *Equality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

12. Sen uses the metaphor of equality in different "spaces." See pp. 19–26.

13. The complex ins and outs of the concept of equality are perhaps most forcefully brought out in Douglas Rae et al. *Equalities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981).

14. Bellamy's work is available in many editions; first published in 1887. Interestingly, while Bellamy would forbid monetary inequalities, he permits unequal distributions of other things, such as honors and numbers of hours worked.

15. The role of these three values is stressed in Scott Gordon, *Welfare, Justice, and Freedom* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980) and in my *Economic Justice* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1998).

16. For a defense of the incentive argument, see Thomas Nagel, *Equality and Partiality*, pp. 90–95. For an egalitarian critique of the incentive argument in Rawls, see G. A. Cohen, *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), chaps. 8, 9.

17. For a selection of debates on desert, see Louis Pojman and Owen McLeod, eds., *What Do We Deserve?* (Oxford, 1999). Even self-described egalitarians often defend desert-based inequalities. See, for example, Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue* (New Haven, Conn.: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 74–76, and G.A. Cohen, *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* p. 130.

18. In a famous philosophical one-liner, Nozick argues that "patterned" distributions of resources would require the prohibition of "capitalist acts between consenting adults"; *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, p. 163.

19. Harry Frankfurt in "Equality as a Moral Ideal," *Ethics* 98 (1987), pp. 21–43; reprinted in Pojman and Westmoreland, *Equality*, pp. 261–273. Page references here are to the reprinted version in Pojman et al.
20. Frankfurt, p. 268.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 271.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Richard Arneson, "Equality," in R. Goodin and P. Pettit, eds., *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell, 1993), p. 499.
24. Ronald Dworkin discusses the expensive tastes problem in *Sovereign Virtue* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 48–59.
25. This oversimplifies key issues. To the extent that success in the market is determined by factors other than effort and/or contribution, it is not personally deserved. So, windfall profits are not deserved; nor are rewards for happening to possess features which happen to command a high rate of return. My appeal to personal desert is partially in deference to its widespread appeal and does not completely reflect my own beliefs.
26. Sen, pp. 79–87. Sen's central criticism of Rawls is that Rawls focuses on the distribution of primary goods without recognizing that the same package of primary goods will not provide the same level of "functioning" for everyone. This argument would apply to any theory that focuses on determinate amounts of resources; equality of resources does not produce equality of capacity to act.
27. Sen, p. 111.
28. Sen, p. 109
29. For Sen on poverty, see *Inequality Reexamined*, pp. 107–116. On different and changing definitions of poverty in the United States, see James Patterson, *America's Struggle Against Poverty, 1900–1994* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 11–12, 159–61.
30. But cf. "Not to be able to afford a movie or a glass of beer is a kind of starvation—if everybody else can," Dwight Macdonald, quoted in James Patterson, *America's Struggle Against Poverty, 1900–1994* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 160.
31. Sen, pp. 115–116.
32. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 440–446; Avishai Margalit, *The Decent Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 1.
33. This variability is part of what makes Michael Walzer's "communitarian" account of justice in *Spheres of Justice* plausible. Walzer is right to stress that different communities have different understandings with regard to the distribution of various goods. But Walzer appears to think that anything that a community approves is in principle compatible with justice while I believe that communities define what a decent level is but that having defined this, justice requires that they strive to provide a decent level for all—whether or not the society itself accepts that conception of justice.
34. Nagel, *Equality and Partiality*, p. 64.

