

Williams “On the Idea of Equality”

1 Williams’s project

Williams gives the thesis for his paper at the bottom of p. 231. (The words “In what follows ...” are a giveaway.) I put in the numbers so I can explain what he means below.

In what follows (1) I shall try to advance a number of considerations that can help to save the political notion of equality from these extremes of absurdity and triviality. ... (2) These considerations will not enable us to define a distinct third interpretation of the statements which use the notion of equality; it is rather that they enable us, starting with the weak interpretations, to build up something that in practice can have something of the solidity aspired to by the strong interpretations. (3) In this discussion, it will not be necessary all the time to treat separately the supposedly factual application of the notion of equality, and its application in the maxim of action. ... The two go significantly together: on the one hand, the point of the supposedly factual assertion is to back up social ideals and programmes of political action; on the other hand ... those political proposals have their force because they are regarded not as gratuitously egalitarian, aiming at equal treatment for reasons, for instance, of simplicity or tidiness, but as affirming an equality which is believed in some sense already to exist, and to be obscured or neglected by actual social arrangements. (Williams 1973, 231-32)

(1) Williams begins by drawing a contrast between *factual* statements about equality and statements about equality as a *political aim*. He notes that in both cases, when people try to explain what they mean by equality they often wind up saying something either absurd (obviously false) or trivial (true but unimportant) (Williams 1973, 230-31).

There are four cases:

1. Absurd meaning of equality in a factual statement: all people are the same (e.g. equally strong, intelligent, etc.).
2. Absurd meaning of equality as a political aim: all people should be treated exactly the same.

3. Trivial meaning of equality as a factual statement: all people are people.
4. Trivial meaning of equality as a political aim: there has to be *some* reason for treating some people differently than others (e.g. “she’s a woman” or “he’s black”)

Williams’s aim is to express an idea of equality that is neither absurd nor trivial.

(2) What he plans to do is show how the apparently trivial meanings of “equality” have meaningful implications. When coupled with the considerations Williams will point out, they support a meaningful statement of equality as a political aim.

This is the most important sentence in the paragraph.

(3) In particular, Williams will argue that the *factual* statements about equality support the statements of equality as a *political aim*. He will maintain that the political aim of equality is based on the idea that social arrangements can fail to treat people as the equals that they, in fact, are. When this happens, the social arrangements are irrational: they treat people as if they were something that they are not.

One reason why this is notable is that it challenges the depth of a distinction that is commonly drawn between facts and values.

2 How the paper is structured

Williams divides his paper between (1) goods that should be distributed equally and (2) goods that have to be distributed unequally.

The case for equal distribution is built out of the apparently trivial factual observations about what all people have in common. He makes this case in the first two numbered sections: “Common humanity” and “Moral capacities” (Williams 1973, 232–39).

The third numbered section, “Equality in unequal circumstances,” is about what the idea of equality says about goods that are unequally distributed (Williams 1973, 239–49). The apparently vacuous starting point here is the idea that there

should be a reason for treating people differently. Williams thinks that the relevant reasons come from the nature of the goods in question. The egalitarian political aim is to see that they are distributed rationally, that is, according to the nature of the goods; an irrational distribution, by contrast, gives the goods to those who pay the most for them.

3 Goods that Should be Distributed Equally

Williams asserts that all people are factually equal in having a desire for integrity, which he understands as the “desire to be identified with what one is doing, to be able to realise purposes of one’s own, and not to be the instrument of another’s will” (Williams 1973, 234).

The egalitarian political project that develops out of this factual kind of equality involves exposing social hierarchies that are based on false beliefs.

The idea is that teaching someone something false about their condition, such as that inequality is natural, is in conflict with facts about equality, namely, that everyone has a desire for integrity, to identify with their aims in life and not to be an instrument of another’s will.

In this way, you get something interesting out of the apparently empty starting point that all people are equally human.

4 Goods that Should be Distributed Unequally

A society owes equal respect to the integrity of all of its members. But not all goods can or ought to be distributed equally. Some goods, such as health care, should be distributed according to need; it would be weird to distribute health care equally. Other goods, such as higher education, are distributed according to merit; it should be offered to those who are more capable of profiting from higher education before it is offered to those who are less capable.

Here the relevant facts are about the *nature of goods*. Health care is for curing illness; university education for learning.

The egalitarian political project that follows from these facts is one that tries to make the distribution of goods line up with what they are for: need in the case of health care or merit in the case of higher education. In particular, the aim of egalitarian political reform is to remove wealth as a condition for receiving these things.

In this way, you get something interesting out of the apparently vacuous starting point that there has to be some reason for unequal treatment.

5 Conflicts Within the Idea of Equality

The essay ends with an interesting discussion about how the different aspects of equality collide with one another (Williams 1973, 248).

Equal opportunity *requires* inequality. It makes sense only if there is competition for goods that only some can merit. The goods that are distributed unequally according to merit are *desirable* and *important*. Because this is so, one strand of our thinking about equality pushes us to favor equal opportunity: everyone should have the same realistic chance to develop the talents and skills that would enable them to compete for the merited goods.

Our common humanity, on the other hand, depends on the thought that things like talent or success aren't essential to who we are. That sits uneasily with the thought that some people should get the desirable and important merit goods *because* they are more talented or successful.

References

Williams, Bernard Arthur Owen. 1973. "The Idea of Equality." In *Problems of the Self*, 230-49. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.