Conclusion:

Peers and Equals

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My purpose in this book has been to unpick the modern idea of ‘basic equality’—both what it means and how it developed historically. Today, this idea is often defined alternatively as a matter of equal status or worth. For Jeremy Waldron, it means that every human being shares equally in some status whereby we are ‘one another’s equals.’¹ For Anne Phillips and others, it is the idea that ‘all humans are, in some basic sense, of equal worth.’²

On either view, basic equality is not simply a descriptive claim, but a normatively egalitarian one. Political philosophers and theorists of many different stripes regard it as simply intuitive that those who are equal in the relevant respects should, as a matter of justice, be treated as equals, as well—that is, in Ronald Dworkin’s ubiquitous phrase, ‘with equal concern and respect.’³ Even though we may (and do, as we shall see) disagree vociferously about what ‘equal respect’ entails, when it comes to human beings or persons, we move readily from one claim to the other—that is, from being equal in some respect(s) to being an equal.⁴

¹ This is a VERY ROUGH draft of the conclusion for my book manuscript in progress, entitled First Among Equals. Apologies for infelicities and inconsistencies of style. Please do not cite or circulate without permission. Contact: teresa.bejan@politics.ox.ac.uk. I am grateful for your feedback.

² E.g., Jeremy Waldron, One Another’s Equals (Harvard, 2017), 1-2. Waldron also distinguishes analytically between human dignity and basic equality, but includes them among the same ‘constellation’ of concepts. As a sortal status, he argues, ‘[basic equality] categorizes legal subjects on the basis of the sort of person they are…[B]asic human equality denies that there are differences of sortal status correlating to differences of kind among humans’ (Waldron, One Another’s Equals, 7–8.) Human dignity, by contrast, is a special status: ‘[i]t refers to the standing of human beings…as persons who command a high level of concern and respect…a high and distinctive status to humans [in contrast with] non-human animals’ Waldron, 3.

³ See Waldron, One Another’s Equals, 15.

⁴ Like most commonplaces in contemporary political philosophy, this one can be traced back to Rawls’s Theory of Justice (1971). In A Theory of Justice, Rawls calls this ‘fundamental’ equality, ‘as [the concept] applies to the respect which is owed to persons irrespective of their social position… It is defined by the first principle of
Moreover, despite our disagreements about its implications, most philosophers and theorists agree with Dworkin that basic equality is a distinctively modern idea—perhaps even the defining premise of modern moral and political philosophy.\(^5\) Richard Arneson has put the view with beneficial bluntness: ‘Claims about basic human equality…mark a divide in moral thinking between a premodern world in which nobles are regarded as having greater worth than peasants…and a modern world that repudiates these crude prejudices.’\(^6\) The problem is, as Anne Phillips has pointed out, that Arneson’s just-so story is simply wrong.\(^7\) Not only has modernity produced plenty of its own ‘crude prejudices’—including forms of scientific racism and sexism alien to pre-modern eras. The idea that all humans are in some profound sense ‘equal’ is, in fact, an ancient one.

As we saw in Chapter One, the 1st-century Roman jurist Sabinus claimed that ‘all humans are equal’ (*omnes homines aequales sunt*) with respect to natural law.\(^8\) This claim subsequently became central to both civil law and Christian theological traditions, and thus was broadly accepted within the Roman Empire and medieval Christendom. Yet evidently, in these contexts the equality of human beings was seen as consistent with hierarchies of all sorts, including many more sophisticated than modern philosophers allow. As Chapters Two and Three show, it was only in 17th-century England and in the hands of ragtag radical groups like the Levellers, Diggers, and Quakers that the claim that human beings were ‘equal’ by justice and by such natural duties as mutual respect; it is owed to human beings as moral persons’ (447).

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\(^7\) Phillips, *Unconditional Equals*, 40 and passim.

nature began to have seriously and systematically disruptive political, social, and economic consequences, let alone (if one may pardon the anachronism) identifiably ‘egalitarian’ ones.  

Given this, it seems that the important question for political philosophers and theorists, as well as for historians, is not when human equality was ‘invented’ or discovered, but rather how and why this idea became so suddenly and spectacularly effectual as a premise of political argument in a particular place and time. Yet as noted in the Introduction, this question remains oddly unexplored by historians of political thought, who have produced, as yet, no scholarly treatments of *Equality before Egalitarianism* to match Quentin Skinner’s *Liberty before Liberalism* (1997).

The preceding chapters represent a first, small step in correcting this omission. Much historical work remains to be done. In this conclusion, however, I shall turn once more from history to political theory in order to explore the conceptual and normative implications of the forgotten history recovered here for modern controversies.

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11 This is true especially with respect to the Francophone context, which I barely touch, but see Devin Vartija’s recent (and excellent) *The Colour of Equality: Race and Common Humanity in Enlightenment Thought* (UPenn, 2021). That the development of BE is a Western story, at least, born from a general fascination with Athens as the source of ‘democratic equality’ is assumed, although Stuurman does his best to challenge this assumption. A revision of this focus on Western European Christian political thought with respect to equality is thus needed, but I have not attempted it here for linguistic reasons—again, because I’m interested in the history of an idea as attached to a particular word.
The first implication may seem obvious, but it is nonetheless worth repeating: namely, that what we mean when we apply the concept of equality to human beings—whether in the first century or the twenty-first—isn’t obvious at all.

Not only are the claims that human beings are ‘equal’ and ‘equals’ not necessarily equivalent; both also suggest very different things to different people: that we are all the same, or that we are all different; that each counts for one and no one more than one, or that everyone is of inestimable value. For neo-Kantians like Rawls or Dworkin, basic equality means that humans are awesomely rational creatures capable of justice and morality; for Hobbes and his modern followers, it stipulates that they are self-interested individuals inclined to suicidal competition for status, as well as scarce resources. Sometimes, assertions of basic equality convey a question: who are we, really? Or more often: who do you think you are?

Not only is equality far from self-explanatory, its meaning and practical demands differ greatly depending on its ‘insinuation’ with other concepts or ideals. As we saw in

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12 For one such common humanity account, see Stuurman, The Invention of Humanity. See also Andrea Sangiovanni, Humanity without Dignity: Moral Equality, Respect, and Human Rights (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).


14 J.S. Mill attributed the dictum ‘everybody is to count for one and no one for more than one’ to Jeremy Bentham, J.S. Mill, ‘Utilitarianism’, in Collected Works, ed. J. Robson (Toronto, 1961), para. 36.


19 I borrow the idea of insinuation from Murad Idris, who has explored how, in the history of Western and Islamic political thought, the concept of peace became attached to other ideas—such as friendship, fraternity,
previous chapters, pre-modern ideas of human equality relied for content on notions of balance and indifference inherited from ancient mathematics and jurisprudence. Modern egalitarians describe BE in the language of Euclidean geometry as ‘axiomatic,’ but Euclid’s *Elements* presented equality (isotêta) as a relationship of identity or exact correspondence between objects sharing a unit of measure or magnitude, such as number, length, or weight (I.Prop.35-6). Thus when Aristotle reported that ‘justice is a kind of equality,’ the sense evoked was that of ‘the equal’ as even or level, with the operative image that of a scale evenly balanced between two objects of exactly equal weight. Equality understood as quantitative indifference thus led easily to an aristocratic ideal of equality-as-balance, in which equal shares of social goods were due only to those of equal worth. Even Athenian democrats rejected the idea that every human being as such could or should be considered equally worthy.

In the middle decades of the seventeenth century in England, equality became closely associated with concepts more at home in early modern English institutions like the courtroom, the common, and the ‘gathered’ (congregational) church. These different insinuates produced different conceptions of equality, in turn. Chapter Three described how the Diggers and early Quakers pioneered competing conceptions of equality-as-commonality and equality-as-unity, respectively. The former presented the ‘equal’ creation-right of commoners as a privilege to be asserted collectively against the arrogance of primogeniture, or the exclusive right of first-born sons to property in land. The latter located human equality in our ‘oneness’ in Christ and concluded that there was nothing therefore to

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justice, etc.—and how these ‘insinuates’ determined and delimited the meaning of peace, in turn. For example, if peace is a form of friendship, those who are not friends must be enemies at war. Murad Idris, *War for Peace* (Oxford, 2018), 2-3.

differentiate between, let alone respect, in individual human beings. The result was the Quakers’ memorable program of universal disrespect towards their fellow creatures, under the tagline of Acts 10:34: ‘God is no respecter of persons.’

Still, in learned and Latinate intellectual contexts, the crucial pre-modern and early modern conception of human equality remained equality-as-indifference. Sabinus’s statement that omnes homines aequales sunt had been fundamentally an observation of individual humans’ indifference with respect to natural law. That is, whatever characteristics might distinguish them as ‘persons’ under civil law, every human (whether male or female, old or young, free or slave) belonged equally to the same species. For Sabinus and other jurists, this shared nature meant that every human was, in turn, indifferently obligated under or equal subject to natural law—in stark contrast with the civil law, which distinguished between the status and obligations of freemen and slaves.23

As ideas of human equality moved from the Roman Empire to Roman Christianity, the combination of equality-as-indifference operated in tandem with the related, aristocratic ideal of equality-as-balance to ensure little in the way of this-worldly consequences. In his commentary on the Book of Job (c. 595), for example, Gregory the Great pointed to the place where Job demonstrated his humility by submitting to God’s judgment on an ‘equal footing’ with his servants in order to remind his readers that God would make just distinctions of merit between them on the basis of their natural indifference in the next world, and not their superior wealth or social status in this one. Here and elsewhere, equality-as-indifference ensured equal subjection to judgments made in accordance with equality-as-balance: He to whom all were ‘equally’ (indifferently) subject would apply His ‘equal’ (balanced) judgment to them, in turn.

23 Digest of Justinian, 50.17.32. For example, every human might be obligated to preserve himself; yet masters had the right to beat their slaves, not vice versa.
Pre-modern human equality-as-indifference was thus a far cry from modern basic equality. Human beings might be *aequales* by nature, but they were also evaluatively disparate or distinct, some better and some worse. That equal nature did not, then, imply equal worth explains why the ancient idea of human equality was not normatively egalitarian. It was, in fact, *normatively hierarchical*. As a status of equal subjection to balanced judges (God, above all), it became foundational to the hierarchically-ordered distinctions governing heaven and earth, by which ‘superior’ persons or souls rightly presided over ‘inferior’ ones. Human equality was thus a basis not for respect, let alone *equal* respect, but ‘respective’ treatment reflecting the unequal worth of individual human beings.

Understanding the priority of this *indifference principle*, if you will, also points us toward the crucial insinuate that, at last, credibly converted human equality into a *normatively egalitarian* premise. This was the concept of *parity*. As we saw in Chapter One, in classical and post-classical Latin, the term *pares* was used to describe things that were sufficiently similar in ability or worth to be treated as comparable or matching. Think a ‘pair’ of shoes. The phrase *par esse*, or ‘to be *par*,’ likewise conveyed a sense of something being ‘fit’ or ‘meet,’ as in appropriate.24 This sense of similarity or equivalence in the domain of value persists today in the ‘par’ of exchange. Yet parity, unlike equality, was compatible with difference, both in quantity and quality, and so became especially useful in describing social relations. For example, Cicero distinguished between those who were *aequales* in a measurable trait like age and those who were *pares* in rank or virtue who ‘congregat[e] most easily with their peers [*pares cum paribus*].’25

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25 *De Senectute*, III.7.
Conceptually, then, parity described an evaluative, often social relation, with positive connotations of some shared virtue or value. As I noted in Chapter Two, social parity *simpliciter* thus operated as what Waldron, following Rawls, calls a ‘range property’—that is, a binary property contingent on a quantitative or scalar one. For example, persons were *pares* when they possessed some (usually positive) trait beyond a certain threshold. Beyond this, their relative merits did not affect their shared status. In modern English, we would say that they were ‘peers’ and to be acknowledged as such, despite their differences.

Accordingly, as we saw in Chapter Two, parity would become synonymous with aristocracy in early modern English due to its close association with the division of English society into two chief classes—‘Peers’ (from the Latin *pares*, via medieval French) and ‘Commoners.’ As the jurist Sir Edward Coke explained in his *Institutes* (1642): ‘Every of the Nobles is a Peer to each other, though they have several names of Dignity, as *Dukes...Earles...and Barons*; so...each Commoner is a Peer or Equall to another, though they be of several Degrees, as *Knights, Esquires, Citizens, Gentlemen, Yeomen*, and *Burgesses*’ (19). ‘Peer’ or ‘Equall’ were thus both plausible translations of the Latin *pares* in early modern English and could be synonyms; but where both terms were in use, the former conveyed a definite sense of superior rank, while ‘Equals’ were equally inferior. Both social statuses were compatible with differences of degree with respect to an individual’s particular dignity.

The key historical argument of this book is thus that the idea of natural equality-as-*indifference* became normatively egalitarian in early modern English only through its insinuation with the idea of parity—specifically, that of social parity among Peers or Equals. As we saw in Chapter Two, this was the achievement of Levellers like John Lilburne,

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26 Waldron cites as an example ‘being in Scotland.’ If a place falls within a fixed range of coordinates, it counts equally as ‘being in Scotland,’ despite its relative distance from the border (2017, 117-20).

27 I am grateful to Kinch Hoekstra for drawing my attention to this reference.
Richard Overton, and Thomas Rainborough, who as Commoners, traded directly on the ambiguity of the noun ‘Equall’ as a synonym for ‘Peer’ in order to claim the privileges of peerage for themselves. They did this under the auspices of a longstanding idea of human equality that was, by that time, largely uncontroversial.28

It is no coincidence, then, that Levellers like Rainborough and Lilburne remain beloved of even the most analytic philosophers and theorists of basic equality and egalitarianism today.29 In their pamphlets and petitions, the Levellers pioneered an understanding of human equality that sought to convert what had been (1) an indifference principle into (2) a parity principle. E.g.:

1. Those who are equally human should be treated equally (that is, the same or indifferently).

2. Those who are peers should be treated on a par (that is, as of comparable worth or value).

Levellers like Lilburne combined these principles, claiming that God had created every human being, individually and naturally, as ‘equal and alike’ in dignity, majesty, etc. This combination produced a Leveller idea of natural equality-as-parity akin to modern basic equality:

3. Those who are ‘equal and alike’ by nature should be treated both equally under the law and on a par—that is, of comparable worth—socially and politically.

In the context of early modern English society, this meant specifically that Commoners should be respected on a par with Peers by Parliament.

28 By 1631, claims to natural equality had become so ubiquitous that Filmer could begin Patriarcha by complaining that the ‘supposed natural equality…of mankind’ had achieved the status of a ‘truth unquestionable’: hence ‘equity require[d] that an ear be reserved a little for the negative.’ Filmer, Patriarcha and other Political Writings (Cambridge, 1991), 3.

Today, the Levellers enjoy an outsized reputation compared with their brief time on the historical stage (fl. 1645-1651). While the Libertarian Right credits them with having invented classical liberalism, the British Left celebrates them as founders of the English radical tradition. But their innovative conception of equality-as-parity was, I argue, influential mostly indirectly, as the chief target of better-known contemporaries, like Hobbes and Locke, and later Mary Astell. Hobbes and Locke, especially, are often credited with introducing basic equality into the history of political thought, but this is a mistake. But Chapters Four and Five detail how, when theorizing about equality, these thinkers were responding to, resisting, and reining in the competing and contradictory conceptions of equality developed as pressing practical demands by the Levellers, Diggers and Quakers.

The history recounted here thus allows us to put the Great Men (and Women) of the tradition of Western political philosophy firmly in their place as reacting to and often against the rhetorically and practically powerful—if sometimes philosophically incoherent—claims put forward by activists. For example, while the idea that human beings were equally (that is, indifferently) free had been standard natural law fare for centuries, the Levellers’ translation of equal freedom into equal lordship was more controversial. Lordship, along with the many other positional goods (e.g., authority, majesty, etc.) with which Lilburne and Overton endowed mankind—implied superiority, and hence the existence of inferiors. Yet as Francisco Suarez first pointed out, ‘it is not’—and cannot be—‘true that every individual man is the superior of the rest.’

Contemporaries therefore would have recognized in Leviathan’s famous description of the ‘naturall condition of Mankinde’ a satire on Lilburne and Overton’s original position. In Hobbes’s state of nature, individuals were as little lordlings engaged in a suicidal status-

competition to vindicate their natural superiority. Moreover, practically, women would eventually come to fill the inferior role for 17th-century natural rights theorists, as Mary Astell pointed out. Yet Hobbes himself embraced the image of levelling in *Leviathan*—both in his chosen title and in its striking cover image of a giant towering over a plain and comprising countless individuals, every man with *his hat still on!* For Hobbes, however, acknowledging one’s fellow men as *Peers* was not an option; only the securely low status of equal subjection would suffice, ‘without any honour at all.’ Accordingly, in the ninth law of nature (against pride), one finds the egalitarian premise in its comparatively inferior form: ‘*that every man acknowledge other as his Equall by Nature.*’

Or consider Locke, who described the state of nature in his *Second Treatise of Government* (1689) as follows:

‘A *State also of Equality*, wherein all the Power and Jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than another: there being nothing more evident, than that Creatures of the same species and rank promiscuously born to all the same advantages of Nature, and the use of the same faculties, should also be equal one amongst another without Subordina­tion or Subjection….’

Waldron cites this passage frequently as the foundation of Locke’s ‘egalitarian theory’ of politics. For Waldron, it is ‘egalitarian’ in the sense that men’s equality by nature is taken to entail their equal juridical status—and thus to rule out any natural hierarchies of ‘subordination’ (i.e. ordered degrees of precedence) or ‘subjection’ (i.e. juridical distinctions

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33 ‘As in the presence of the Master, the Servants are all equall, and *without any honour at all*; So are the Subjects, in the presence of the Soveraign. And though they shine some more, some lesse, when they are out of his sight; yet in his presence, they shine no more than the Starres in the presence of the Sun*’ (L ii.18.280, my emphasis).
34 L ii.15.234. See also Kinch Hoekstra, ‘Hobbesian Equality’ (2013).
of status and authority). Here, the fact that human individuals are naturally ‘equal’ issues in a normative demand that they that recognize one another as equals, too. This status-equality thus appears as prior to and normative over any hierarchical arrangements subsequently introduced between them, by either by convention or consent. That is, a presumption of in-rank equality is essential.\textsuperscript{37}

And yet in the Second Treatise itself, Locke explicitly accepted various forms of subjection and subordination as consistent with their natural equality:

‘Though I have said above…That all Men by Nature are equal, I cannot be supposed to understand all sorts of Equality. Age or Virtue may give Men a just Precedency. Excellency of Parts and Merit may place others above the Common Level. Birth may subject some, and Alliance or Benefits others, to pay an Observance to those to whom Nature, Gratitude or other Respects may have made it due; and yet all this consists with the Equality, which all Men are in, in respect of Jurisdiction or Dominion one over another…being that equal Right that every Man hath to his Natural Freedom, without being subjected to the Will or Authority of any other Man.’\textsuperscript{38}

Note that here, Locke’s language—of ‘a just Precedency,’ ‘above the Common Level,’ or of ‘subject[ion]’ by birth, and due ‘Gratitude or other Respects’—is explicitly hierarchical. It implies precisely the sort of human relations of subordination and subjection that natural equality was supposed to preclude. Elsewhere, Locke conceded directly that, despite their equal natural freedom, ‘there is, I grant, a Foundation in Nature’ not only for the

\textsuperscript{37} For Waldron, it is ‘a striking implication of this sort of ranking that within each rank, everything is equal,’ and he goes on to insist that ‘this has been hugely important for theories of human equality (in John Locke’s work, for example). See Waldron, Dignity, Rank, and Rights, 32.

\textsuperscript{38} Locke, Two Treatises of Government, 322, Second Treatise §54. Waldron, too, notes this passage but concludes that for Locke, whilst we may be unequal in ability, this passage does not contradict the fact that we are ‘one another’s equals so far as authority is concerned,’ Waldron, God, Locke, and Equality: Christian Foundations in Locke’s Political Thought, 32.
subordination of wives to their husbands in marriage, but for women’s *subjection* to men, in general.  

In converting Leveller equality-as- *parity* into an exclusively juridical, or even jurisdictional, ideal, Locke thus made it compatible not only with in-rank inequalities (of wealth, dignity, etc.), but with precisely the sort of hierarchies of subjection (between the sexes and otherwise) that Levellers like Lilburne had sought to preclude by declaring that every man *and* woman had been created ‘equal and alike’ by nature. This, I take it, was Locke’s point. To see it, however, we must take Locke at his word, and interpret his theory in the context of the Civil War-era contestations described above.

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That modern philosophers make woefully partial historians won’t come as a surprise to anyone. Still, the degree to which even the most ostensibly ahistorical philosophers have relied on just-so stories about the historical emergence of basic equality is striking. So, too, is the fact that these stories often do concrete normative work in their accounts. For instance, it

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To his credit, Waldron acknowledges these passages; nevertheless, he insists that they do not materially impact the egalitarianism of Locke’s political theory, or his assertions of equal status. Waldron writes, ‘In the passage about husbands and wives, Locke … is inferring a difference in authority from a difference in capacities of human beings; and that is fundamentally at odds with what he wants to say generally about equality. This inconsistency … is the only place in his mature thought where Locke bases entitlement to authority on superior capacity,’ Waldron, *God, Locke, and Equality: Christian Foundations in Locke’s Political Thought*, 31–32.

Elizabeth Anderson has since followed Waldron’s lead on this point (Anderson, *Private Government*, 16, 151).
is the definitive *modernity* of BE that is meant to save philosophers and theorists the trouble of arguing for it. In Rawlsian language, it permits us to take the wrongness of institutions like slavery or patriarchy for granted, belonging to the domain of our ‘considered judgments’ about justice on the basis of which we can then reason to more controversial conclusions. That we know better, on this view, than bygone generations might as well be an accident—albeit a happy one.

When it comes to basic equality, however, I believe that a preponderance of bad history has exacerbated conceptual and normative confusions. And so let us begin by considering some of the conceptual benefits that follow from my historical account, according to which ancient conceptions of human equality-as-*indifference* gave way to an early modern conception of equality-as-*parity*.

Today, we might recognize the former, indifference principle as the assertion of formal equality and universalism long associated with ideals of legal equality and impartiality. But this is also the sort of equality that has led Peter Westen, among others, to conclude that the idea is fundamentally ‘empty’—to say that human beings are equal is to say nothing more than that they are equally human, an empty categorical formality.40 Acknowledging this, Bernard Williams insisted that there was something salutary, nonetheless, in rehearsing this tautology, while wondering whether equality, alone, was sufficient to ground a more demandingly egalitarian political program.41

Indeed, it seems that the normative egalitarianism of basic equality, from Rawls onward, rests on two features that are in tension, if not outright inconsistent, with indifference:

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41 Williams, ‘The Idea of Equality.’
1. That the equality of human beings or persons is a matter of their *worth*, i.e. human beings as such possess intrinsic value or valuable status grounded in their possession of some valuable trait(s)—e.g. reason, moral agency, sentience, a sense of justice, etc.  
2. That the worth or value of human beings is *positive*, hence deserving of or otherwise entitled to ‘respect’ as positive recognition, as opposed to contempt or disrespect.

The second point, again, may seem too obvious to mention. But as we have seen, it is crucial if one would exclude a program of universal disrespect *a la* the early Quakers as satisfying the demands of basic equality.

In a posthumously published reflection, G. Cohen associated these features of modern basic equality with a line from Robert Burns’s ‘A Man’s a Man for a’ That’ (1795): ‘The rank is but the guinea’s stamp, the Man’s the gowd [gold] for a’ that.’ Notice here that Cohen embraces Burns’s metaphor of the ‘mere guinea’s stamp’ to frame social distinctions, including those based on economic position, as *arbitrary*; underneath it all, according to Cohen, as well as Burns, we’re made of the same valuable stuff and, presumably, in equal amounts. This equality of worth appears to be essential in establishing that the respect due to every individual *qua* human being is also equal—although Cohen himself expresses discomfort with Dworkin’s ‘equal concern and respect’ dictum, suggesting that in the realm of recognition it seems that ‘different degrees of respect are appropriate for different adults.’

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42 Even when basic equality is figured, instead, as a matter of *status* (as in Waldron 2017), that status is likewise predicated on the possession of valuable qualities.
43 In this essay, Cohen confesses: ‘I have never given the attention that a person of my views should have done.’ G.A. Cohen, ‘Notes on Regarding People as Equals,’ in Michael Otsuka (ed.), *Finding Oneself in the Other* (Princeton, 2012).
44 Robert Burns, *A Man’s a Man for A’ That* (1795), quoted in Cohen, 193, 200.
45 Cohen, ‘Regarding People as Equals.’
There is, of course, a long history of using the metaphor of coinage to make sense of human equality, and Cohen’s embrace of Burns’s image is suggestive. Not only did the democratic political institutions of ancient Athens (e.g. *isonomia, isegoria*) insist on ‘counting’ adult male citizens as equal (*isotes*) with respect to value, on the model of the *nomisma* or currency minted authoritatively by the *polis* (in Athens, the famous silver ‘owls’).\textsuperscript{46} As we saw in Chapter One, the Gospel of Matthew depicted Jesus as likening the ‘image’ of God in man to the Emperor’s sovereign imprint on a Roman denarius or silver coin (Matt 22:19-21). Christian commentators from Augustine to Aquinas would subsequently explicate man’s creation *imago Dei* explicitly in similarly numismatic terms.

Yet unlike Burns, the point for these pre-modern commentators had been that, like coins of common currency, every human being bore the *same* stamp and yet was disparate in value. The evolution of this metaphor from Greece to Roman Christianity may well have reflected the increasing variety of coins in the later Empire, as well as the uncertainty that any coin in circulation actually contained its stated amount of precious metal. Whatever the cause, Christian commentators stressed that the indifference of one’s subjection to divine authority did *not* entail parity with respect to one’s spiritual worth—just as Caesar’s image might be impressed on coins struck of different metals and in different denominations. The implication was that every man was made of valuable stuff, but not necessarily the same valuable stuff, let alone in strictly equal amounts. Men must do their best to distinguish here on earth, but only God could accurately see through the stamp to the metal within and assess its true worth hereafter.\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{46} For a related analysis of democratic institutions as ‘counting’ as opposed to ‘clumping’, see Schwartzberg, *Counting the Many: The Origin and Limits of Supermajority Rule* (Cambridge, 2013). Of course, as we saw in Chapter One, the key point for Athenian politics was that all adult male citizens in good standing could—and should—plausibly ‘count’ equally, while all human beings (including women, barbarians, and slaves) could not.

\textsuperscript{47} There is a suggestive similarity here to Plato’s Myth of Metals, which encourages citizens to regard their natures, like those of precious metals (gold, silver, bronze), as ‘fixed.’ Karl Popper famously excoriated this story as evidence that Plato favored a form of racialized hierarchy akin to that of Hitler’s Germany. Yet as Tae-
Again, it is in 17th-century England that we see a subtle transformation of this metaphor in line with nascent ideas of natural equality-as-parity. Specifically, we see Samuel Rutherford and others arguing that the differences between individual humans were superficial matters of ‘the stamp,’ not the stuff. One can recognize the same idea every man’s comparable worth in Thomas Rainborough’s epochal statement that ‘The poorest hee that is in England hath a life to life as the greatest hee’—a sentiment echoed more than a century later in Burns’s poem, in which the poor man and the rich are alike of gold, their relative social and economic positions but variations in ‘the guinea’s stamp.’ Still, despite the Levellers’ best efforts, even an insistence on their shared worthiness was not enough to mandate that every man should be treated as an ‘Equall,’ let alone a Peer. As the judge at the first York Assizes following the regicide in 1649 put it: ‘All men in their Originall Creation are all of one and the same Substance, Mould and Stamp, yet…the finde a fitnesse in Subordinations and Degrees among them, for the better ordering of their affairs.’

In any case, the relevant idea here, conceptually as well as metaphorically, is that human equality is a matter of parity, not indifference. Moreover, it suggests that the normatively egalitarian features of modern basic equality noted above (shared worth and positive respect, neither of which, it seems, must be possessed in strictly equal amounts) are themselves the product, historically and conceptually, of early modern equality-as-parity. And yet today, the language of parity (if not the concept) has largely disappeared from our

Yeoun Keum points out in her recent book, *Plato and the Mythic Tradition in Political Thought*, the myth itself also equates that fixed nature with an individuals’ educational performance to date, not with their hereditary descent. It is thus not only meritocratic, but explicitly provisional: ‘The point of the myth is that the circumstances of biological birth alone are inadequate for determining a citizen’s place in society, and that institutions in the city must redefine the measure of a person’s nature around a more appropriate [i.e., philosophical] standard’ (45). Plato’s language throughout this discussion is pointedly numismatic: Socrates is proposing, in effect, a great recoinage of the citizenry and adopting myth as the appropriate method to achieve it. For background, see Stefan Eich, ‘Aristotle on Currency and Reciprocity,’ *Political Theory* (2019).

political and philosophical vocabularies; we prefer to speak of dis-parities—of treatment, wealth, power, etc.\(^{49}\) So, too, from our history, parity has been systematically effaced as a distinct concept through the act of translation. For instance, modern English translations have rendered the Latin *pares* routinely as ‘equals,’ as in the phrase *primus inter pares* (‘first among equals’) used to describe the Roman Emperor.

Even so, for two decades now Ruth Chang has been seeking to revive the concept of parity explicitly in the fields of ethics and jurisprudence. She argues that the concept of equality implies a fundamentally trichotomous relation: things (or persons) are always either ‘more than,’ ‘less than,’ or ‘exactly equal’ with respect to whatever particular characteristic is being measured.\(^ {50}\) In the domain of value, this produces the particular trichotomy of ‘better than,’ ‘worse than,’ or ‘exactly equal.’ Chang presents parity as an alternative to the overtly hierarchical arrangements that she worries are produced inevitably by introducing the concept of equality with respect to value. As an alternative, she has introduced parity as a fourth, possible relation, describing cases of evaluative ‘comparability’ in which two things are similar enough to be evaluatively comparable and yet are incommensurable, so that there exists no determinate answer to whether one is better or worse or both are equally good. (Her favoured example is that of Mozart and Michelangelo with respect to creativity.)

Thus far Chang has resisted applying this analysis to discussions of basic equality, or to human beings as such. Yet for centuries, Latin writers did. And so, too, I think should we. Because when we say today that we are ‘one another’s equals’ we are *not* in fact saying that we are of strictly equal worth or status, but rather that we are *pares* of comparable worth, and therefore entitled to parity of respect. And while, strictly speaking, the value or status

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\(^{49}\) An important exception here is Nancy Fraser, who appeals to ‘participatory parity’ as a principle of justice in *Scales of Justice* (2008). Yet she says little about what she takes parity, specifically, to mean.

conferred by parity remains ambiguous, either high or low, the sense of parity in play in modern discussions of basic equality tends to be high-status—it is that of peers, rather than that of mere equals.

Here, however, one might object that human beings, as such, are not incommensurable, and so Changian parity does not apply. If Chang’s comparisons are in the realm of apples and oranges (for example, music and sculpture as forms of creativity), surely basic equality is a matter of apples to apples? Insofar as individuals are all tokens of the same human type, then yes. But in discussions of basic equality, we are concerned rather with the valuable characteristics determinative of human worth. Here, I agree with Waldron that humanity is best understood as the product not of one such characteristic (e.g. moral agency or Rawls’s sense of justice) but of a constellation of characteristics that no two human beings will share in exactly equal amounts. While Waldron offers an incomplete list, I agree with Anne Phillips that we should give up on what Cohen called ‘the wild goose chase for defining characteristics,’ instead remaining inclusive and perhaps even agnostic on what might count as a relevantly valuable trait. We needn’t insist on the infinite specialness of every individual, or indeed their worth beyond price, only their plurality with respect to the panoply of traits we associate with human worth. If we do this, however, Changian parity begins to capture the sort of relationship involved much better than any idea of strict equality.

Notice that construing basic equality as a parity relation in this way would also allow us to avoid the most vexing theoretical challenge pressed by critics of basic equality. Let’s

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51 For example, Magna Carta’s (1215) influential grant of punishment to free men ‘per legale judicium parium suorum’—that is, by the legal judgement of one’s pares—was long interpreted restrictively, as applying only to barons and other aristocrats. But an earlier charter (1201) that entitled Jews accused by Christians to judgment per pares Judei suggests that social parity obtained among those deemed alike enough, in the relevant respects, whatever their relative status. I am grateful to Kinch Hoekstra for drawing my attention to this reference.

52 I thank Jay Wallace for pressing me on this point.

53 See Waldron, One Another’s Equals, ??

54 Cohen, ‘Notes On Regarding People as Equals.’ See also Phillips, Unconditional Equals, 57.
call this the *gradability objection*. As Louis Pojman and others have pointed out, it is theoretically implausible, as well as empirically false, to claim that every person is strictly or even roughly equal with respect to their innate abilities or characteristics (e.g. the sense of justice, moral worth, dignity, reason, etc.). But if individuals differ in degree, as we must, with regard to our valuable traits, Chang’s trichotomy inevitably follows—that is, we should also be either ‘more’ or ‘less,’ ‘better’ or ‘worse,’ with respect to our worth and status, too.

To deny this, as modern egalitarians do, seems arbitrary.55

Here, Waldron follows Rawls in resorting to the technical language of range properties in explicating basic equality as a form of status-equality in order to mitigate this challenge.56 Still, recovering parity as a distinct concept helps us see that the problem arises in the first place due simply to the doubling-up of ‘equality’ language, which produces a tension between our status as ‘equals’ and our ‘unequal’ degree. Accordingly, reintroducing parity to this discussion dissolves the problem: people can clearly be *pares*—that is, peers or equals—despite their individual inequalities with respect to moral worth, ability, etc. And yet, Waldron consistently avoids the language of parity in discussing basic equality, even where Rawls uses it himself.57

The resort to range properties is just one of several ways in which theorists of basic equality have sought to render the sources of human worth ‘nongradable,’ in Gregory Vlastos’s phrase.58 Ian Carter, for example, has suggested that the equal respect they are due itself demands that we spare individuals the disrespect implicit in evaluating, let alone

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56 Waldron, *One Another’s Equals*, 113-4.
57 As Rawls states in *Theory*: ‘While individuals presumably have varying capacities for a sense of justice, this fact is not a reason for depriving those with a lesser capacity of the full protection of justice. Once a certain minimum is met, a person is entitled to equal liberty on a par with everyone else.’ Rawls, *Theory*, 443, for Rawls on range properties, see 444-5.
measuring, their relative agential capacities.\textsuperscript{59} The idea is that such assessments are themselves violations of basic equality and its stipulation that every human being is of equal worth.

More recently, Anne Phillips has followed Carole Pateman and Charles Mills ‘register how thoroughly ideas of [human] equality are imbued with exclusionary conditions.’\textsuperscript{60} Still, for Phillips, these conditions are introduced by the many modifiers through which philosophers have sought to make human equality more manageable—not only ‘basic,’ but also ‘natural’ and ‘moral.’\textsuperscript{61} These, Phillips suggests, inadvertently introduce objectionable gradations and exclusions within the category of humanity itself.\textsuperscript{62} Still, one worries that the conceptual priority of equality-as-indifference means that any invocation of equality itself implies gradation.

For the Greeks and Romans, certainly, the opposite of equality was always difference, and those differences a matter of degree as measured against some standard, scale, or grade. And so, it seems, for us. What philosophers call ‘strict equality’ is essentially indifference. Little wonder, then, that a surfeit of equality-talk can obscure more than it reveals. Like the Levellers before us, egalitarian philosophers and theorists continue to trade on an ambiguity in English whereby pares can be rendered as ‘equals’ as well as ‘peers.’ This linguistic ambiguity has been hugely generative. But equality-as-indifference is assessed through precise measurement or grading, while equality-as-parity is assessed through the rough-and-

\textsuperscript{59} Ian Carter, ‘Respect and the Basis of Equality,’ \textit{Ethics} (2011). Compare Jo Wolff and Elizabeth Anderson’s concerns about the contempt shown towards the disadvantaged on distributive egalitarian accounts.

\textsuperscript{60} Phillips, \textit{Unconditional Equals}, viii.\textsuperscript{61} For the necessity of modifiers, see Stuart White, \textit{The Idea of Equality}.

\textsuperscript{62} Phillips thinks the language of ‘basic equality’ is itself covertly teleological and misleading. For example, to present the equality of human beings as basic suggests that it is a secure foundation on which to build towards more ‘real’ or ‘substantive’ forms of equality. Anne Phillips, \textit{Unconditional Equals}, vii; see also Anne Phillips, ‘Gender Equality: Core Principle of Modern Society?’, \textit{Political Theory} (2018).
ready medium of particular pair-wise comparisons. Applying equality-language to both relations obscures this crucial difference and threatens to undermine our status as pares.

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Here proponents of basic equality face an important question: is equality of worth or status really the essential idea? Or is that we are pares with respect to worth? That is, are any two individuals or groups alike enough to be considered comparable in value and therefore treated on a par—that is, on or at the same qualitative level? And if it is the latter, what might philosophers and theorists gain by recovering the language of parity, as well as the concept? And what, indeed, might we lose?

Thus far I have focused on the historically significant conceptual overlap—and tension—between equality-as-indifference and -parity in early modern English. Specifically, I’ve suggested that this overlap was crucial to the emergence of human equality as an incipiently egalitarian premise of political argument in the 17th century. Moreover, I’ve suggested that the loss of a distinction between equality and parity in modern English has had conceptual implications. Among other things, it explains why profligate equality-talk—and the rampant equality-talk of post-Rawlsian political philosophy, in particular—so often confuses rather than clarifies.

In this section, I’ll briefly consider the normative benefits—and challenges—of re-interpreting basic equality as a parity principle today. To start, simply notice that parity is resistant to two other popular objections raised by egalitarianism’s critics. One of these is the levelling-down objection articulated by Derek Parfit and others. Although this is usually presented at the level of egalitarianism’s distributive conclusions, it can also present itself at

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the level of our premises.63 If humans are equally worthy, why aren’t they equally worthless? Didn’t King Midas learn that where all is gold, it’s also worse than dross?64 It seems that, in order for the ‘respect’ due to every human being to be both (1) equal and (2) worth having, humans as such must be distinguished, implicitly or explicitly, from other ‘lesser’ creatures—this, in turn, gives way to the dynamic Will Kymlicka dubs ‘human supremacism.’65

The second we might call the Procrustean objection. Inspired by Greek mythology, this is the worry that relations of equality sit uneasily (at best) with difference. It has been rehearsed most recently by Anne Phillips, who worries on feminist grounds that equality, as both a premise and conclusion of political argument, is overly prescriptive in insisting on the sameness of individuals, and thus portraying any differences of aptitude or outcome among them as potentially objectionable.66 If we are all equal, shouldn’t we all be treated the same—and end up in the same place, more or less?

Because parity is compatible with difference, it is resistant to the Procrustean objection outlined above, and because it stipulates that the worth shared by human beings is positively valuable, it eludes the levelling down objection, as well. But here, one might object that the demand that we treat those who are pares with respect to human worth as ‘on a par’ or with ‘parity of respect’ potentially accommodates too much differential treatment. To return to my original historical example: even for the Levellers, natural parity did not imply political equality with respect to the franchise and other political rights. While historians of political thought have focused discussion on the Leveller exclusion of ‘almstakers’ and

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63 Derek Parfit, ‘Equality or Priority’ (2000); see also Harry Frankfurt, On Inequality, (Princeton, 2015).Wi
64 This is the key to Plato’s criticism of the ‘isonomic’ or equality-loving man as indiscriminate with respect to value in Republic Book VIII.
66 Phillips, Unconditional Equals, ch. 5.
‘servants’ from the franchise at the 1647 Putney Debates, we can see this dynamic most clearly in their views on women and political voice.67

According to Lilburne, individual women were created ‘equal and alike’ with men and so also had a claim to have their voices heard by Parliament. But those voices were to be counted by means not of voting, but petition—an instrument that carefully preserved their inferior social status and granted them a merely ‘proportionable share’ of political liberty.68 In this respect, the ideal of ‘equal government’ embraced by Levellers remained an aristocratic matter of balancing the different parts of the commonwealth.69 As Coke himself pointed out, parity of social status still permitted of differences of degree. Barons and earls were Peers, and yet remained unequal in their degrees of dignity. A society of pares was therefore not a society of citizens possessing equal rights.

Certainly, such proportional standing in a society of pares will not satisfy modern egalitarians for whom the point remains to respect others as ‘equals’ of equal worth. And yet, the potential inequalities of wealth, rights, and social dignity consistent with parity are not obviously greater than those present in at least one influential vision of a society of equals: meritocracy. Of course, criticism of meritocracy is old as the term itself, coined in 1958 by the British sociologist (and future leader of the British Labour party) Michael Young (1915-2002).70 In theory, meritocratic systems offer an egalitarian alternative to aristocracy by ensuring equality of opportunity—that is, by allowing individuals to compete on an equal

67 For a more in-depth discussion, see Teresa M. Bejan, ‘What was the point of equality?‚ American Journal of Political Science (online first October 2021).
68 See the 1649 Women’s Petition, quoted in Patricia Crawford, ‘The Poorest She’ (2001), 210.
69 Likewise, for James Harrington ‘equal government’ did not mean treating all people, let alone all citizens, equally or as equals; rather, it meant balancing the different parts of the free citizenry through differential representation and rights on the basis of age, sex, wealth, marital status, and class (whether ‘horse’ or ‘foot’), and predicated on the continued exclusion of ‘servants’ or slaves (Wootton 1992, 36-7; cf. Davis 1998).
footing, and with equal freedom to rise to the level of their talents. In practice, however, social mobility declined precipitously in the last century in the United States and other liberal democracies, while those who believe that they have earned their advantages fight ferociously to preserve them for themselves and their children.\footnote{For more critical arguments along these lines, see Sandel, \textit{The Tyranny of Merit} and Dan Markovits, \textit{The Meritocracy Trap: How America’s Foundational Myth Feeds Inequality, Dismantles the Middle Class, and Devours the Elite}, 10–11, 194, 307.}

For Young himself, this result would have been unsurprising. Like many on the Left, he saw meritocracy as a violation of basic equality in theory as well as practice, because it presents the advantages of some as justified by their superior gifts. When inequalities of wealth and status track individual differences by design, why shouldn’t those who succeed regard themselves as in some sense \textit{better} than those who do not? But surely, as Cohen puts it, if basic equality is to mean anything ‘the right principle is that \textit{nobody is anybody’s better.}’\footnote{Cohen, ‘On Regarding People as Equals.’} The man’s the gold, for all that!

Still for late-century liberal egalitarians like Dworkin, respecting persons ‘as equals’ never meant ensuring strictly equal treatment, let alone equal outcomes. Treating people as equals meant above all granting them equal rights and taking those rights seriously—civil rights in the case of those who were citizens, and human rights for those who were not. Following Rawls, Dworkin and others thus deemed economic inequality permissible, so long as it benefitted the least well off.\footnote{See Ronald Dworkin, ‘What Is Equality? Part 2: Equality of Resources’, \textit{Philosophy & Public Affairs} 10, no. 4 (1981): 283–345.; Cohen, too, argued that ‘When aggregate wealth is increasing, the condition of those at the bottom of society, and even in the world, can improve, even while the distance between them and the better off does not diminish, or even grows,’ cf. G.A. Cohen, \textit{If You’re An Egalitarian, How Come You’re So Rich?} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 113.} Egalitarian justice was a matter rather of ensuring that every person got what he or she deserved. Dworkin’s own egalitarian project attempted to refine what Rawls had called ‘\textit{fair} equality of opportunity,’ by respecting individuals’ rights...
while redressing their unequal starting points in life.\textsuperscript{74} For Rawls, these famously included not only one’s parentage and upbringing, but even one’s ‘talents,’ including one’s willingness to put in effortful work.\textsuperscript{75} Dworkin brought these and other disadvantages under the broader umbrella of ‘bad luck’ for which a society of equals should compensate its members.\textsuperscript{76}

On this view, the problem with existing meritocratic systems from the perspective of basic equality was not theory, but practice—namely, too-weak redistributive policies that allowed successful individuals to entrench their advantages over generations. What a society aspiring to equal respect needs, according to these theorists, is a more perfectly meritocratic procedure augmented by affirmative action to equalize opportunities not only between individuals, but generations, to ensure status ‘as equals’ for all.\textsuperscript{77} But that status will, presumably, remain consistent with significant inequalities of wealth, esteem, etc, along with other forms of diversity. Here, one worries that Dworkin’s oft-rehearsed distinction between treating individuals ‘equally’ and ‘as equals’ reduces to the rather vague suggestion that individuals should be treated \textit{appropriately} with respect to their particular circumstances. But if this is all basic equality demands, then proponents of hereditary or natural aristocracy would find little to disagree with.\textsuperscript{78}

Today, Dworkin’s distinction between treating people \textit{equally}—that is, applying the same standards indifferently to everyone—and treating them \textit{as equals}, by acknowledging their differential backgrounds and needs, remains influential, especially among critics of his distributive paradigm. Relational egalitarians like Elizabeth Anderson and Samuel Scheffler

\textsuperscript{74} Rawls, \textit{A Theory of Justice}, 73.
\textsuperscript{77} See for instance, David Miller, \textit{Principles of Social Justice} (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999). Again it is striking here how admissions procedures at elite academic institutions seem to have been taken as general models of the promise and pitfalls of meritocracy in society as a whole.
have sought to break out of the distributive justice cul-de-sac by figuring equality explicitly as a matter not of distribution, but *relations*—that is, around questions of standing, not stuff.

In her seminal paper, ‘What Is the Point of Equality?’ (1999), Anderson argued that egalitarian political theory had become fatally unmoored from authentically egalitarian practice. Dworkin’s ‘luck egalitarianism,’ in particular, not only treated the disadvantaged with contempt, but neglected totally what was at stake when individuals and social movements resist oppression. ‘The point’ of equality, she insisted, was not to claim compensation for ‘bad luck,’ but to relate to one another *as equals*.*’79* Unlike distributive justice, Anderson’s ideal of relational equality thus speaks directly to the micropolitical turn taken by modern activists, attending to the interpersonal aspect of oppression and the everyday, embodied struggle for equal standing.*’80* It has become increasingly prominent as a result.*’81* Yet even in faulting their predecessors for a narrowly reductive or ‘arithmetic’ approach to equality, Dworkin’s relational critics have left his fundamental formulae intact.*’82*

Still, as Cohen notes, there remains something pretty awkward about the idea of ‘equal respect’—something that Stephen Darwall’s distinction between ‘recognition-’ and ‘appraisal-respect’ can’t quite evade. What, after all, does it mean, practically, to treat people ‘as equals’? Take a title like ‘Professor.’ Does equal respect mean that universities should dispense with titles altogether, by putting students on a first-name basis with their teachers?*83*

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Or should junior faculty—especially women and minorities—stand on ceremony, demanding the same signs of respect afforded their (often male and white) peers? Experience suggests that students will presume to address young women familiarly, while senior men alone enjoy the privilege of saying, ‘Please, call me John.’ Similar difficulties arise in the context of the increasingly fraught politics of pronouns.\(^{84}\) When we talk about respect, it seems that distinctions and inequalities of degree keep worming their way back in.

From the perspective of the ‘big’ questions of political philosophy like justice, rights, and the common good, such micropolitical conflicts can seem, well, small. But increasingly, this is the relational terrain on which principles of equality are forged and fought for. And here, parity rather than equality captures much more clearly the quality of relationship that relational egalitarians are after—treatment not only equally or as equals, but as peers of high or honourable status. It is worth remembering that the English ‘status’—from the Latin stare or ‘to stand’—connotes the embodied, as well as figurative, sense of standing not only as a matter of one’s rights under law, but of how one physically stands in relation to others. Contemporary theorists of equality have made this embodied aspect of status-relations central to their theories. For instance, Anderson and Waldron, as well as Philip Pettit, alike stress the postural politics or ‘orthopaedics’ of dignity in a society of equals—in which all have the ability to stand ‘upright,’ look others ‘in the eye,’ and tell them ‘to get lost.’\(^{85}\)

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\(^{85}\) (Waldron 2012, 21; Pettit 2014, xxvi-ii) Pettit credits Lilburne along with John Milton as inspiration for what he calls the ‘eyeball test’ of social justice, arguing that a just society is one wherein you can walk tall and assume the status of an equal with the most powerful in the land.

The unabashed masculinism of these discussions is, I think, instructive, as is the similarity to the policing of reverse-dominance hierarchies among chimpanzees described by Boehm in *Hierarchy in the Forest*. 
Today, the embrace of universal ‘levelling up’ accounts of basic equality and human dignity by historically-minded theorists like Waldron suggests that the implicit distinction between high-status peers and low-status equals remains alive and well. My own analysis of equality-as-parity tracks—at least in part—Waldron’s account of the modern progress of human dignity as entailing ‘an upward equalization of rank, so that we now try to accord to every human being something of the dignity, rank, and expectation of respect that was formerly accorded [only] to nobility.’ But it also, I hope, helps us see that this is only half of the story; it excludes the rival—and arguably more influential—visions of levelling down, including that of Hobbes, as well as the early Quakers. Crucially, recovering parity allows us to make the altitudinal distinction between these accounts explicit, and thus to identify at least two kinds of egalitarianism occupying Dworkin’s ‘egalitarian plateau’—one positive that seeks to ‘level up’ by claiming parity of respect between the least privileged and the most; and one negative, that ‘levels down’ by reducing everyone to low-but-equal status.

Keeping this in mind, it seems to me that parity makes better sense not only of what egalitarian movements like the Levellers were up to, but what of what contemporary social movements are doing now—namely, demanding that those who are least advantaged in a given society experience parity of respect and treatment with the most. Consider the major egalitarian movements of our moment—Black Lives Matter and #MeToo. These campaigns display a striking absence of equality-talk on the ground in favor of recognizably ‘paritarian’ demands. Like the Levellers before them, ‘the point’ for these activists is not that Black Americans or women lack equal rights, but rather that they continually encounter disparate treatment and their voices are discounted when compared with the high-status ‘Peers’ of our

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86 Waldron, Dignity, Rank, and Rights, 33
88 But see Chris Lebron, The Making of Black Lives Matter […]
society, namely educated white men. While political theorists continue to prefer the God’s-eye view and mathematical precision of equality-talk, these assertions of parity occupy a partial and human perspective rooted in the institutional structures and practices of social parity within particular communities. Society sets the level; activists seek to level up. What they care about is the quality of treatment, not the strictly equal enumeration of rights.

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I began this book by observing that, for centuries, the rhetorical power of equality as a moral and political ideal has derived, more and less explicitly, from its mathematical and juridical connotations of precision and transcendence. Dworkin and others’ insistence that a belief in basic equality ought to be regarded as ‘axiomatic’ conveys the same idea. Accordingly, one might wonder whether my suggestion that egalitarians embrace parity as their principle, at least with respect to social relations, risks sacrificing too much rhetorically. 89

This paper is already too long, so let me simply say, ‘perhaps,’ while noting that embracing parity explicitly as an egalitarian value has rhetorical benefits, as well. Among progressive social movements today, there is a creeping disillusionment with equality on Procrustean grounds. This had led some scholars, as well as activists, to reject the concept of equality altogether in favor of alternatives like ‘equity.’ As Rogers Smith has recently pointed out, even modern liberal democracies like the United States formally committed to political equality have not and do not aspire to afford their citizens exactly equal rights. ‘Differentiation is, always has been, and always will be the rule, not the exception’ with

89 Certainly, it puts distance between contemporary relationally-minded egalitarianism and the American Civil Rights movement, continuity with which is essential to the self-conception of many theorists and activists. See Pineda […] and Terry […]
respect to legal citizenship. It is virtually certain that no two American citizens will share exactly equal rights and so, Smith suggests, we should shift our attention to a more ‘equitable’ ideal of lived citizenship.  

As far as I can tell, the preference for equity rests mainly on its homophony with equality—and the ease with which it can supplant the latter in established acronyms like EDI (Equ[al]ity, Diversity, and Inclusion). But the preceding discussion suggests that parity better captures the similarly, not identically, respectful treatment that egalitarians are after, and which impinges most directly on the ‘lived experience’ of differentiated citizenship described by Smith. Moreover, while equity is increasingly offered as a replacement for equality as an ideal, parity complements it. Hiving off parity in this way can, I hope, save the baby (in this case, ‘equality’ as a political ideal) from being thrown out with the bathwater.

What I propose is that modern egalitarians recognize that what we call ‘basic equality’ today as the product of two, potentially contradictory principles: *indifference*, which is presumptively universal, impartial, and inclusive, and *parity*, which is potentially particular, partial, and sometimes exclusionary (or at best, cautiously inclusive). Thus when it comes to its normative implications or demands, we might reliably distinguish between demands of *parity*—that those who are pares should be treated as peers, with high honor and status—and those of *indifference*—where those who are equal are treated indifferently in two senses: (1) as ‘the same’ and (2) as ‘nothing special.’ Sometimes, I think that philosophers, at least, should reserve the term ‘equality’ only for these last two demands—a view akin to what Sam Bagg has called ‘negative egalitarianism.’ But perhaps distinguishing between different *conceptions* of equality is enough.

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90 Rogers Smith, ‘Legal Civic Orders and Equitable Lived Citizennships,’ APSR (2021), 12.  
91 Smith has graciously volunteered this explanation (private conversation).  
92 See also Sangiovanni […]
In any case, all of the demands noted above seem to me essential for any adequate theory of egalitarianism. After all, Procrusteanism has its time and place, particularly when differences harden into new distinctions and self-styled ‘superiors’ must be cut down to size. Moreover, indifference is often the right principle, especially in courts of law. Parity, in turn, allows us to name and accurately diagnose the continued role of hierarchy and exclusion in rendering equal status meaningful, as a high rank worth having, in our own, aspirationally egalitarian societies. It also reminds us that hierarchically-ordered exclusions are a practical challenge that societies of equals will continue to confront, even if we resolve them theoretically.93

My own view is that to recognize and guard against the threat whereby precedence becomes entrenched as privilege, theory must remain in touch with practice. This conviction motivates my own ‘historically-informed’ approach to normative questions. Certainly, the historical practices and arguments I have explored in this book remind us that egalitarians should not lose sight of concrete sites of equality-as-parity, like the courtroom, the classroom, or the church. For it is only in light of these experiences that the premise of basic parity comes to seem not only plausible, but probable.94 But it also suggests that political theorists should stop treating hierarchy as simply aberrant in favor of exploring the ways in which some hierarchies are essential in securing one’s status both as a peer and an equal, functioning as mutually protective of those most vulnerable within them.95

Finally, this book has suggested that the persistence of hierarchy and exclusion in aspirationally egalitarian societies is best understood not as a failure to apply the principle of equality equally, but rather as a legacy of early modern efforts to reconcile equality-as-parity

93 For instance, it is my view that, in practice, respect is disjunctive and resists equalization. But I have been explained to repeatedly that this is a problem solved, theoretically, by Stephen Darwall’s distinction between recognition and appraisal respect.
94 Compare Phillips’s comments on Arendt. […]
95 I think honorifics in educational contexts ideally function in this way.
with equality-as-indifference. In this, I believe that history can help by giving us a front-row seat to the hard work involved in constructing and maintaining sites of parity, as well as sites of equality, and to the often fraught relationship between theory and practice we face therein.