

# Equality—an American Dilemma

Joseph P. DeMarco and Samuel A. Richmond

Americans are committed by Constitutional ideals to political equality. On the other hand, our economic ideals are libertarian and permit inequalities. Court decisions and federal legislation in the 1950's and '60's created a strong commitment to the practical realization of political and social equality. Yet we have come to see in the 1970's that economic inequalities make this achievement very difficult. The pressures for economic equality are relatively recent, because both poor and rich in America have in the past assumed the plight of the poor can be relieved most quickly through increases in total production rather than through a change in the distribution of what is produced. The prospect of limited economic growth in the future, or even no growth, dramatically shifts the pressures for economic improvement of the poor away from increased production toward greater equality in distribution. The dilemma we face is greatly aggravated by external pressures limiting, and sometimes reducing, our ability to draw on the energy and material resources of other nations, and by external demands from other nations for a greater share of what we are capable of producing.

In the 1940's Gunnar Myrdal spoke of our "American dilemma" as a situation in which two courses of action both involve unacceptable consequences. The dilemma he addressed revolved around the conflict between a theoretical commitment and a widely accepted social practice. At the time of the Declaration of Independence the United States of America was theoretically built on the foundation of equality, yet blacks were systematically relegated to an inferior political and legal status. This was the dilemma despite the different levels of the alternatives. The country remained unwilling to give up its ideals, yet racism made such ideals practically unfeasible.

The problem in the past was conceived as a problem of civil rights and equality before the law. And this dilemma, in a slow and uneven fashion, was resolved. Indeed, the solution, while practically troublesome, posed no theoretical difficulty. The civil rights move-

ments, as the abolition movement before it, involved no theoretical problem of justice; the *just* course was not *really* in question. The problem was to bring practical affairs into accord with theoretical perception. But beneath these political and legal problems are questions that did not get a full hearing and that do involve theoretical problems in deciding on the just course of action. These questions have to do with economic equality.

Political and legal equality are not the whole of justice; indeed, they are often considered to be empty without economic and social equality. The line between economic and legal equality is often elusive. Economic justice is a positive, or enabling, allocation of benefits. In the recent Detroit busing case the majority found no evidence of interdistrict *de jure*, legal segregation. But in Douglas's dissent, and implicit in Marshall's dissent, is the acknowledgment that Detroit's blacks are economically disadvantaged and can pay for neither equal educational opportunity nor flight to the suburbs. In short, political and legal equality are hollow without economic equality.

After significant civil rights victories the United States now must face the dilemma posed by economic inequality in a no-growth economy—a dilemma that is both practical and theoretical. The implications of our Constitutional ideals are egalitarian, but our economic libertarianism is nonegalitarian. We have a strong practical commitment now to political and social equality; yet this requires an achievement of economic equality to which so far we are not committed. This dilemma is a problem of justice. It is the problem of economic distribution: What is the permissible range of differences in the distribution of goods, services, and burdens? How much economic inequality is morally permissible? How much economic equality is practically feasible?

Americans have never fully appreciated the facts of economic inequality. The needs of the poor have been thought to be temporary. Americans have considered themselves people of plenty, whose expanding gross national product and rising standard of living would eventually be great enough to meet the rising expectations of the poor. While faith in ever increasing affluence as a solution to poverty was never totally realis-

---

JOSEPH P. DEMARCO and SAMUEL A. RICHMOND are Associate Professors in the Department of Philosophy at Cleveland State University.

tic, today such a view is myopic. The oil shortages of the winter of 1974 brought the first widely accepted sign that we may have already exceeded the level of production that can be sustained in the long run. The increases in food prices are even more significant. These came about partly as a result of a vast world shortage of food. Yet at this time, when many are realizing the limits to American growth, we face a heightened call for international aid. "Our" economy is now a global economy. For political and economic reasons as well as humanitarian reasons the United States is pressed into turning a greater proportion of its wealth toward meeting the world demand for lifesaving food. Our dependency upon the resources of others does not permit us to ignore the dependency of others on us.

Americans face the prospects of a no-growth economy in which there is no hope that inequalities of wealth will be ameliorated by increased production, but only through significant social reorganization. At the same time, international demands upon United States production will make domestic reorganization more difficult. It is not likely that poor and middle-class Americans will easily accept transactions that place further burdens on them. Solutions to the problems at home alone require a thorough commitment. With all its wealth the United States has yet to face its most serious problems effectively: inadequate nourishment among the urban and rural poor; little or no health care for the rural poor; collapse of housing in the cities; a deteriorating environment; extreme differences in income, in treatment in the courts, and in political influence. These are problems of economic equality; even pollution hurts the poor more than the rich. But the ideal of equality is not restricted to the boundaries of a single country. The demands for greater global equality are presented to us in emergency terms of immediate death and misery. Interdependency among nations with regard to energy needs, food needs, and economic stability makes it physically as well as morally impossible for any one nation to ignore these demands.

The second American dilemma is due to poverty in affluence in a country that increasingly understands that equality of opportunity partly means equality of wealth. Unless there is reorganization in a no-growth economy, the poor will become a permanent caste. But America's poverty is in a rich country within a poor world. The *ideal* of equality calls for worldwide redistribution, requiring that America's social practices be tuned to their global context. Our high consumption of beef means an expensive use of lifesaving grain. Our manner of using automobiles means less fertilizer for advanced and underdeveloped countries alike. Our destruction of one million acres of farmland a year for nonfarm use means that many will starve.

The new American dilemma is, then, a double dilemma: poverty in affluence set against affluence in world poverty, one apparently at odds with the other. Happy solutions are anachronistic. This dilemma is apparent to many, but theoretical guidance is not well

entrenched as it was in facing the civil rights problem.

The problems of this twofold dilemma must receive the best guidance we can find. The concern is one of justice, to ourselves and to the world. Problems of justice cannot be decided in an existentialist leap. In times of crucial difficulty we must systematically articulate the basic philosophies to which we look for guidance. We must attempt to determine which of these best serves us in dealing with the difficulties at hand.

Three traditional theories have been most influential in the past and seem likely candidates in terms of today's problems. Briefly defined, they are:

1. *The Social Contract Model*: A society is just when its basic social practices would be consented to by each member if each adopted the view of a rational individual concerned with his/her own long-run interest.
2. *Utilitarianism*: The just society is the one that consists of those arrangements that yield the greatest sum of goods for the members of the society, each member to count as one.
3. *Justice as Respect*: The just society is the one that secures and maintains respect for persons through social arrangements that are in the common interest but not to the greater advantage of some than of others.

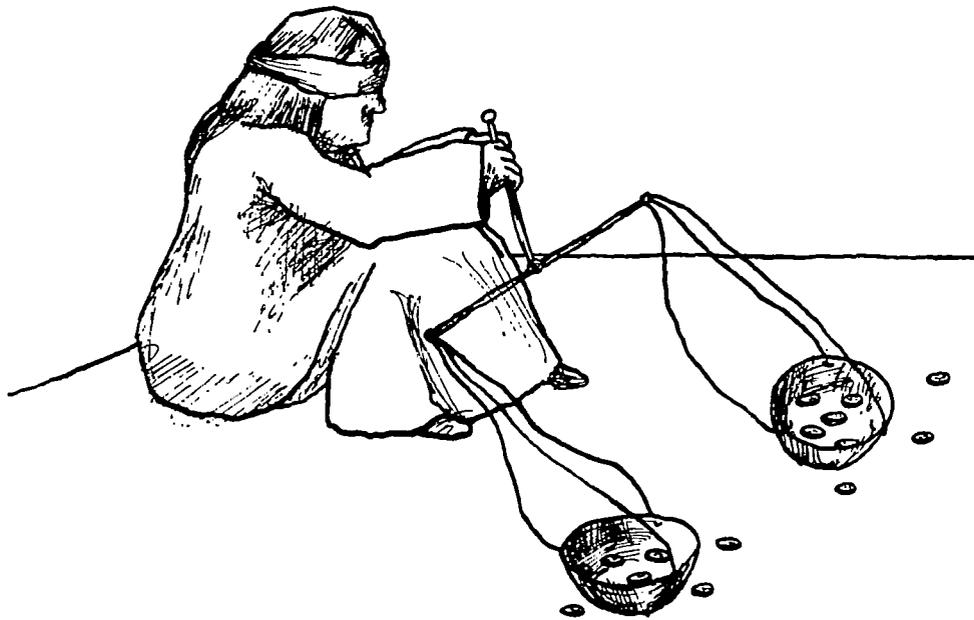
The contract view is associated with Hobbes, Rousseau, and Rawls, the utility view with Mill and Bentham, and the respect view with Kant and King. The contract view has given strong support to political liberty and equality. But the contract view has tended to give priority to liberty in economic relations, and to be tolerant of inequalities on the assumption that with them people produce more and, as a result, everyone enjoys more. Utility has provided strong support for welfare legislation and social reform, especially for those policies that benefit the majority. But it has been weak in its support of equality and liberty. Respect is most often appealed to by reformers seeking to help the worst-off members of the society, especially minority and relatively powerless groups. Thus it gave support for ending slavery, attaining female suffrage, and securing civil rights; and it continues to speak for the interests of the impoverished and the incapacitated.

Each of these conceptions of the proper way to evaluate the justice of human relations has differing implications for how to deal with inequality of income and wealth, given the world context and restricted economic growth. We need to look at each of the three main points of view in order to evaluate their implications for the problems we face. How we deal with pressures for domestic economic equality in a no-growth situation and how we deal with persons of other nations in seeking solutions to our problems may be crucially determined by how we project into the future our past experience with justice.

Social contract theory supported arguments for equal political rights among free male citizens at the time of American independence. The philosophical model used relied on the claim that social order is established by and for the people through their consent. The people make a contract—an original agreement, each with the rest—to establish a particular social order. While this agreement need not have actually occurred, philosophers use it as a model to question whether well-informed people *would* agree to join a social structure *if* they were given the chance. The significant claim made by the social contract model is that all potentially politically powerful persons have a role in the formation of political policy and the distribution of political liberties and offices. This theory, especially

interest. It is in the interest of each to do so only if it secures the assistance and restraint of others. Non-producers tend to be ineffective and need not be taken into account in designing the society.

The contract view does not offer sufficient guidance in dealing with global problems of scarcity. The social contract model was historically introduced to justify the establishment of national sovereignties. If it is extended to the world economy, the contract model loses much of its initial plausibility, precisely because it loses the homogeneity of interest that serves as the basis of consent. With a heterogeneous global population, a generalized social contract approach can be expected to produce unrealistically weak legal, political, social, and economic arrangements.



Stuart Leeds

in its contemporary form, will be used to assert similar claims in economic areas today.

Social contract theory will support arguments that the structure of economic arrangements whereby work and income are distributed must be viewed as the result of an implicit contract among the producing members of the economy. On this view the economy must be organized so that decisions about what gets produced for whom by whom will be democratically decided and not left to an economic aristocracy made up of corporate owners, executives, and nonrepresentative officials in government agencies.

Doubtless the democratization of the economy that is suggested by a social contract view would work against great inequalities of wealth, just as it tended to work against great inequalities of political power. However, it may support arguments for *greater* wealth for the *more* productive, and it may lead us to take a fairly ruthless attitude toward those lying outside the contract, that is, nonproducers and members of other economic units. The contractees are those who have power, and they each enter the contract for their own

**T**he utilitarian model does not view political consent with the reverence accorded it by the social contract tradition. Instead it claims to look to the primary psychological and ethical motivation of human behavior—the pursuit of happiness. Justice is achieved when the sum of happiness in society is maximized and each person's happiness counts equally in the summation. Its primary directive in economic terms is to increase the quantity of goods and services produced. As a result it offers little guidance for a no-growth economy. It may give some support to equality, because excessive goods for some people do not usually increase their happiness to the extent that would be realized with a more equal distribution. Yet this becomes less and less true as goods become more and more scarce.

In times of scarcity utilitarianism may provide support for the more diligent pursuit of nonmaterial production. It may urge greater education and training in the arts, in athletics, and in human services: All of these can contribute to happiness without using proportionately large amounts of material resources.

Yet the utilitarian model has serious weaknesses. Utilitarianism seems too ready to accept the sacrifice of the happiness of some individuals or groups for a greater total. And philosophers have long disputed the notion that we can make the accurate calculations of happiness that utilitarianism seems to require. Furthermore, utilitarianism presents social problems as problems of feasibility and efficiency. As a result it tends to encourage nondemocratic institutions staffed by social engineers who are thought to know best how to shape people's behavior in the direction of predetermined objectives. This view is doubtful in times such as these, when our problems have placed in question many of our objectives. Both the theoretical and practical problems of utilitarianism mar its ability to offer clear guidance on matters of justice in the face of America's second dilemma.

The third view of society is the respect-for-persons view. In philosophical literature this view stems from Immanuel Kant's claim that people must be treated as ends in themselves and never merely as means; the concentration of the equal integrity of each person supports the establishment of the duty of society to provide equally for each person's pursuit of happiness. Politically, respect for persons was the motivating thought of abolitionists, both before and after independence; it shaped the three Civil War Amendments to the Constitution; and it was appealed to by Martin Luther King, Jr., in the drive for civil rights. It places in people inalienable rights that cannot be contracted away, need not be established by contract, and do not depend upon whether they increase the sum of happiness.

Respect for persons would support arguments in favor of equalizing income for all persons, because it works against making any trait a basis for inequality. Aristocracies of birth, race, sex, wealth, and even ability or merit, by placing features that vary from person to person above being a person, are all suspect as disrespectful of persons. Respect will also support greater personal development as opposed to economic development. It will give positive guidance to a shift in our values away from those of a material culture to those of a more personal and social culture.

Respect theory will help us to deal with our problems in the proper context of the problems of the world as a whole. It will encourage us to seek global institutions in order to deal with global problems, because respect is universalistic in scope. It does not permit national boundaries to be the boundaries of justice. At the same time, it will not permit those who can afford it least to suffer most in the difficult adjustment of national distribution patterns in the context of the adjustment of international patterns.

Respect for persons generalizes and carries to a higher level of abstraction the ideals of equal rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness put forth in the Declaration of Independence. Equality in the right

to life is extended by respect theory to include equality in the right to nutrition and life-supporting health care services. Respect for persons is rooted in the political traditions having to do with the Bill of Rights, suffrage, civil rights, and political equality. It tends to support the extension of these ideas into the area of economic relations among persons. It gives priority to human welfare over human liberty. People ought not to be free to exploit our resources to their own advantage, destroy good producing land, and ruin the potential harvest of the seas. Each person's equal right to life, and to a decent level of living, has priority over economic liberty. In this way it clearly differs from the contract view, which in its most recent formulation by John Rawls still gives priority to liberty.

Respect gives priority to equality in the distribution of goods as opposed to the quantity produced. If a more equal distribution of the goods of the world requires the diversion of productive capacity toward global distributional facilities, respect for persons would support such a shift. In this way it is clearly different from utilitarianism in its implications.

Which conception of the proper relationship of people in society wins our support is of great importance to the future of the world. Such conceptions provide the context for the discussion of future action, and the context will determine basic views translatable into life and death, decency and despair. Respect for persons seems the most genuinely valuable in coming to grips with the problems we face. It offers the best direction for proceeding with dignity and for maintaining a universal perspective. It may well be that our ability to move in the direction of justice will be greatly determined by our ability to maintain respect for ourselves and others.

There is, however, no consensus regarding justice. The view that has currently captured the attention of scholars in America is not a respect view but a social contract view. The view that dominates political officers in America seems to be a utilitarian view. Many among the influential persist in viewing problems as solvable by increased productivity, efficiency, and technological control. The need for unanimity of purpose is great; it is crucial that those who are able to contribute to a consensus do so quickly.

We believe that respect for persons provides the most viable rallying point and the best guidance for the future. But these are questions that require full-scale national and even global debate—constructive debate aimed toward achieving a practical, working perspective. World difficulties will become increasingly serious; the response is likely to be increasing hostility. On the other hand, changing circumstances, serious hardships, and international interdependence may foster an atmosphere of cooperation and respect. The solution to the second American dilemma is global in importance, and the citizens of a starving world surely depend on a just resolution.