

# Radical Egalitarianism

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## The Goals of Radical Egalitarianism

1. **Equality of Basic Conditions.** "[E]veryone, as far as possible, should have equal life prospects." And, we should aim to satisfy everyone's *wants*. And, we should try "to achieve a condition where the necessary *burdens* of the society are equally shared." [88]
2. **If We Can't Distribute Resources Equally?** "[W]e should first, where considerations of desert are not at issue, distribute according to *stringency of need*, second, according to *the strength of unmanipulated preferences* and third, and finally, *by lottery*." [88]
3. **Hierarchy of Needs.** "An egalitarian starts with *basic needs*, . . . , and moves out to *other needs* and finally to *wants* as the productive power of the society increases." [89]

**The Underlying Egalitarian Rationale:** Produce the conditions for the most extensive satisfaction of needs for everyone.

### THE AIM OF RADICAL EGALITARIANISM

We should seek the satisfaction of the greatest compossible set of needs where the conditions for compossibility are:

- (a) that everyone's needs be considered,
- (b) that everyone's needs be *equally* considered and where two sets of needs cannot both be satisfied, the more stringent set of needs shall first be satisfied.

## The Formal Principle of Justice Argument for Radical Egalitarianism

Nielson argues for that the following principle of justice supports Radical Egalitarianism.

### THE FORMAL PRINCIPLE OF JUSTICE

If there are no relevant differences between X and Y, then justice requires that we treat X and Y alike.

**P1** We do not differ about wanting our needs satisfied.

"We all, if we are not utterly zany, want a life in which our needs are satisfied and in which we can live as we wish and do what we want to do." [91]

From these two, we can conclude that "*ceterus paribus*, where questions of desert, entitlement and the like do not enter, it is only fair that all of us should have our needs equally considered and that we should, again *ceterus paribus*, all be able to do as we wish in a way that is compatible with others doing likewise." [91]

#### RADICAL EGALITARIAN PRINCIPLES OF JUSTICE

1. **Equal Rights & Opportunity:** Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties and opportunities.
2. **Egalitarian Distribution:** Income and wealth is to be divided so that each person will have a right to an equal share, after provisions are made ...
  - (a) ... for common social values,
  - (b) ... for capital overhead to preserve the society's productive capacity,
  - (c) ... for differing unmanipulated needs and preferences,
  - (d) ... for giving weight to the just entitlements of individuals.

Note: these principles of justice spell out the rights and duties people have only under *conditions of very considerable productive abundance*.

### *Objections and Replies*

1. *Objection:* If we satisfy everyone's basic needs, then some people won't get what they most want.

*Reply:* "Well, if their not getting them is the price we have to pay for everyone having their basic needs met, then it is a price we ought to pay." [91]

2. *Objection:* Justice requires that we respect Entitlements and Desert. But Radical Egalitarianism will involve taking from some and giving to others.

*Reply:* (1) Maybe not, because one of our basic needs is respect for our entitlements; (2) But, yes, if the needs are great enough, those rights can be overridden. [92]

3. *Objection:* We can't reasonable expect people to impoverish themselves in order to help meet the basic needs of all!

*Reply:* Yes, but the principles of Radical Egalitarianism are only meant to hold under conditions of extensive abundance.

4. *Objection:* Radical Egalitarianism will involve interfering in people's private business, and that violates rights!

*Reply:* We need to distinguish between two different kinds of rights that are important to freedom:

(a) **Right to Fair Terms of Cooperation**

(b) **Right to Non-Interference**

First, the former is more important than the latter. Second, to live in any society whatsoever involves placing restrictions on the latter. So, the disagreement is over what kinds of interference is just.

5. *Objection:* Aren't we punishing the "talented" by preventing them from using their talents to "come out ahead"?

*Reply:* There are many different ways the talented can "come out ahead" without allowing them to amass such great wealth that it infringes upon the rights of others to Fair Terms of Cooperation.