Liberal equality
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To the Memory of Kurt Gutmann
CERTAINLY equality will never of itself alone give us a perfect civilisation. But, with such inequality as ours, a perfect civilisation is impossible.

– Matthew Arnold, “Equality”
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Preface

Having witnessed the enormous concern about inequality in recent years within the United States, we might concur with Tocqueville’s observation that citizens within democratic societies are prone to be preoccupied with equality rather than with liberty.\(^1\) Yet only twenty years ago, John Kenneth Galbraith wrote that “few things are more evident in modern social history than the decline of interest in inequality . . . [;] inequality has ceased to preoccupy men’s minds.”\(^2\) Rather than question whether democratic citizens are “naturally” more preoccupied with liberty or with equality, I want to supply more reasons for citizens of contemporary liberal democratic societies to be concerned with equality, and I want to indicate why that concern should complement, rather than preclude, a concern for individual freedom.

My interest in equality began in a common way: with an intuitive feeling of uneasiness over the extreme poverty and wealth in the United States and Great Britain, the two societies with which I am most familiar. As a student of political theory, I have examined the existing literature on equality. Some of the best works in political philosophy discuss the many meanings and uses of equality as a concept within our language;\(^3\) some of the best in political science measure inequalities of income and wealth within advanced industrial societies and discuss the relative advantages of the measures themselves.\(^4\) The measures of equality told me enough to confirm my belief that many people in liberal democratic societies are quite poor and fewer others very rich. However, empirical theories tell us nothing about which inequalities are most significant or how much inequality is just or unjust. Nor is it sufficiently illuminating of our substantive concerns about equality to explore its meaning as a concept. Equality has so many meanings in our language that it appears to be particularly prone to Tocqueville’s indictment of the “abstract terms which abound in democratic languages”: “An abstract term is like a box with a false bottom; you may put in it what ideas you please and take them out again
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without being noticed." But once one specifies a context, a purpose, and a conceptual framework, the relevant meanings of equality become more limited and the concept of equality takes on an importance for our normative concerns in political philosophy. Therefore, the discussion that follows presupposes a context – specifically that of contemporary liberal democratic societies (I focus exclusively upon the United States and Great Britain); a purpose – justifying a more equal distribution of goods within those societies; and a conceptual framework – that of liberal theory.

Although my concern with equality preceded my education in political theory, teachers, colleagues, and students have enabled me to think about the problem more clearly. Michael Walzer first helped me feel at home as a political theorist in 1969 when I was a college sophomore. Since then he has read, discussed, and criticized my work with the greatest patience and understanding. My intellectual debt to him is very great. Sidney Verba sparked my interest in participation and equality, and encouraged me to undertake my first study of community control. I doubt whether anyone could have forced me to confront skepticism more effectively than has Judith Shklar. I thank her for undermining any degree of intellectual complacency I might once have had. My debt to John Rawls as a teacher and scholar extends even further than is apparent in these pages. I am also extremely grateful to my friend and colleague Dennis Thompson, who judiciously criticized several previous drafts of this manuscript. Huntington Terrill and Bernard Williams have extensively commented upon earlier versions. Terrill impressed upon me the limitations of my argument with regard to problems of international egalitarianism. An ongoing debate with Paul Sigmund while we were jointly teaching an introductory political philosophy course led me to revise my understanding of liberal theory. Although Stephen Holmes read only a small portion of this manuscript, his comments helped me clarify my contextualist claims for liberal egalitarianism. Sheldon Wolin’s comments have led me to reconsider several parts of my enterprise, in particular my claims concerning a Kantian basis for liberal egalitarianism. Were I to respond fully to their comments, I would have to write another, much longer book. Nonetheless, this book is better for those criticisms. And I am very grateful for their encouragement.

I am grateful as well to Abigail Erdmann, who enabled me to write this book by providing welcome relief from the problems of liberal equality. Patricia Williams and Janis R. Bolster gave me
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superb editorial advice. June Traube and Richard Hayden also ably assisted me in preparing the manuscript. My greatest appreciation extends to Michael Doyle, for his steadfast support and wisdom. It should be needless to say that, on having received such good counsel, I alone am responsible for what appears below.

Since I began work on this manuscript in 1973, I have received support from the Danforth Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Council of Learned Societies, and Princeton University. I thank all of these institutions for their generosity.

A. G.