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A. Barton Hinkle: What do we mean when we talk about equality?

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Tom Perriello, the Democrats' insurgent candidate for governor, excites the liberal base of the party because he — like Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, who have both endorsed him — is a conviction politician. He has firm ideas about what government ought to do, and he expounds on them with a degree of depth and precision that puts some other statewide candidates to shame.

Much of what he wants to do involves questions of equality and inequality — terms that pop up again and again in the white papers he has written on the [racial wealth gap](#), help for [working families](#), and [his tax plan](#), and in his [Twitter feed](#), and elsewhere.

Which is refreshing. America, after all, is a nation based not on ethnicity or an accident of history but on ideas and ideals — including equality, the first of the self-evident truths mentioned in the Declaration of Independence.

Stating an ideal and living up to it are two different things, of course. American history has made that painfully clear. But when the ideal is as broad as equality — or liberty, or justice — even stating the ideal doesn't get you very far. At a high enough level of abstraction, everyone can agree on the virtue of equality, liberty, or justice.

But what do we mean when we talk about such things? Isaiah Berlin and others drew a distinction between negative liberty (the absence of external impediments) and positive liberty (the ability to do what you want): You are free to buy a Rolls-Royce because nobody is stopping you, but you are not free to buy a Rolls-Royce if you don't have the money.

There are also different types of equality.

Few people today insist on absolute equality of outcomes, for example, for obvious reasons. If Tom studies for a test and Steve doesn't, it hardly seems fair to give them the same grade, and societies that have tried to operate on such principles generally have turned into hellholes where people end up miserable or dead. Venezuela, for instance, used to outperform Chile on measures of infant mortality and life expectancy. Now the [opposite is true](#).

Moreover, it is not intuitively obvious that a state where everyone is equally poor is always better than a state where at least some people are not. And unequal outcomes can still be desirable: Steve Jobs grew incredibly rich, but he got that way by producing innovations that made millions of people better off. By the same token, confiscating his wealth might have increased overall equality — but it would have improved few lives.

Equality of opportunity seems much more inherently just: If life is a race, then everyone ought to start at the same point; all public schools should meet certain criteria, for instance. Yet Angus Deaton, a Nobel Prize-winning economist and author of “The Great Escape: Health, Wealth, and the Origins of Inequality,” argues that the principle still can be pushed too far. “Few would support a prohibition on allowing parents to use their talents to favor their children,” he said recently.

Deaton also talks about procedural equality, or (roughly) what we would call equality under the law: Is everyone who is equally situated being treated equally, or are some people being treated differently? Do blacks accused of crimes get the same chance as whites to be judged by a jury of their peers — or are they dragged out of the jail by a mob and lynched?

Some kinds of equality can be used as an argument for others. John Rawls did something like that in “A Theory of Justice,” suggesting that if everyone designed the good society from behind a veil of ignorance we would end up with a certain kind of welfare state.

Procedural equality also can be used to justify inequality, as in Robert Nozick’s Wilt Chamberlain hypothetical: If you assume a perfectly just distribution of wealth at starting point A, and lots of people willingly give some of their money to watch Wilt Chamberlain play basketball, then the distribution at endpoint B will be highly unequal, but not unjust.

One appealing form of equality is equality of authority, under which social relations among adults are governed by mutual consent, because no person has the authority to compel the behavior of another. Yet a society like that would have few means to increase equality of opportunity. (And no means to enforce even equal authority, but that’s another story.)

Yet equality of authority does obtain in certain realms, such as the marketplace. You and Akio Toyoda, the CEO of the Toyota Motor Corp., have exactly the same degree of authority: Toyoda can’t make you buy a car, and you can’t make him sell one.

Which does not mean you and Toyoda enjoy equality of power. Chances are pretty good that, as head of one of the world’s biggest companies, Toyoda can get an audience with the president more easily than most other people. But then so can Rihanna or the Dalai Lama. The question isn’t whether some people have more power than others, but how they came by it. Was the process free and fair? Or did they lie, steal, and kill their way to the top?

All of these forms of equality rest on the assumption of another: the equal dignity and moral worth of every person. Unlike its derivatives, that type of equality is beyond dispute.