

---

**RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY**


---

*Bidding for  
Equality*

"What Is Equality?—Part 1: Equality of Welfare" and "Part 2: Equality of Resources" by Ronald Dworkin, in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* (Summer and Fall 1981, respectively), Princeton University Press, P.O. Box 231, Princeton, N.J. 08540.

Efficiency, wealth, liberty—the free market has been hailed for promoting many worthy goals, but equality is not one of them. Yet Dworkin, an Oxford philosopher, maintains that a form of free market is needed to achieve a coherent, fair system for equally distributing resources.

Dworkin examines in detail the pros and cons of two notions of equality. "Equality of welfare" aims to distribute society's resources so that all individuals can fulfill their preferences and ambitions, or so that their lives prove equally enjoyable or successful. But this ideal is fatally compromised by the differing, often mutually exclusive preferences that individuals hold.

Dworkin endorses the contrasting ideal of "equality of resources," by which individuals deserve only equal shares of wealth, no matter how unhappy or unfulfilled this makes them feel. But how can resources be distributed without reflecting the preferences of one individual or group? Ideally, writes Dworkin, society arranges an auction—a primitive form of free market—where individuals can bid for resources with equal amounts of currency.

This may work well on a desert island—or anywhere—for a very short time, but what about later, Dworkin asks, when ambitious souls have turned their shares to profit, unfortunate people have paid medical bills with theirs, and lazy spendthrifts have squandered what they had? There is no justification for permitting individuals to keep the rewards of sheer good luck or forcing them to live with the consequences of unavoidable misfortune, says Dworkin. Permitting the purchase of "bad luck" insurance could ease this inequity. Nor should skillful or more intelligent individuals be especially rewarded, since talent (like a handicap) is pure "genetic luck."

Differences in wealth resulting from hard work, however, should be allowed. How can society make sure that the distribution of wealth reflects the different efforts people choose to make but not the different talents they have been given? Dworkin suggests that the income tax works as a compromise: The levy permits people to achieve financial success through voluntary savings or sacrifice of leisure but implicitly recognizes that some portion of their success must stem from "genetic luck."

With such adjustments—which some Western societies have already made—market-based systems can more fairly distribute wealth than can welfare equality systems. And unlike welfare systems, the market gives people control over their lives, while making them pay the true cost of the lives they choose to lead.