

Is Adequacy Adequate?

Michael S. Merry
University of Amsterdam

In the main, I am in agreement with Ken Howe as it pertains to the broad outlines of both the adequacy and equality frameworks. He is right that the adequacy framework is not devoid of robust egalitarian elements; it attends to the business of constructing thresholds under which no one should be allowed to fall but uses discretion in responding to contextual differences as well as variable human circumstances. Accordingly, important restrictions are imposed on the kinds of inequality allowed, namely, those germane to advantages in democratic deliberation. Howe also is basically correct to say that inequitable outcomes ensuing from the adequacy model are not a foregone conclusion and that democratic deliberation — on which the adequacy model is based — may indeed redistribute upwards. For example, more public funding and resources can be allocated for the least advantaged in order to level the playing field. In short, the adequacy principle permits but does not require inequality above the threshold.

Meanwhile, for its part the equality framework does not jettison thresholds of adequacy. It merely requires that in the distribution of scarce goods and commodities, priority must be given to the least advantaged. Howe correctly observes that distinguishing natural from developed talent is toilsome and that some egalitarians may have become too cosy with meritocratic conceptions of equality. That said, Howe admits that meritocratic concerns are both defeasible and limited in scope; unfair inequalities may be permitted *only* when there are other reasons for allowing and even promoting them, namely, so that important benefits redound to the less advantaged. I also concur with Howe when he argues that any robust conception of equality will not prevent parents “from acting in ways that exacerbate educational inequality.” He offers by way of example course offerings and differentiated instruction that are routinely exploited by middle-class parents.

Summing up, Howe succeeds in demonstrating that the two positions are not poles apart: that the adequacy principle is capable of robust egalitarian interpretation; that the equality principle may be compromised by its reliance on a problematic understanding of talent and effort; and that similar outcomes can be reached — or risks occasioned — by adopting either framework. Much depends on the way in which the different principles are understood and applied. From either side of this debate there doubtless will be different intuitions about which thresholds matter, where the lines should be drawn, or how to balance out one principle or set of goods against others in pluralistic and highly unequal environments. So in what follows I will not quibble further with the nuanced distinctions between the two positions or with Howe’s summary of them. I will, however, address certain parsimonious features of his argument.

In particular, the *civic* notion of adequacy is underdeveloped. Howe argues that the main contribution of the adequacy framework is its emphasis on democracy. He

suggests that we focus on “equal citizenship” rather than on an equal distribution of resources. Following Amy Gutmann, equal citizenship on his account entails that all citizens will be able to “effectively participate in social and political life.” Yet nowhere do we read what this entails. He further argues that the civic virtues necessary for equal citizenship “can only be acquired and honed collectively.” I certainly can imagine what some of these virtues might be, but there is no specification in his argument about which virtues matter, what makes them civic, or how this “collectivity” is to be fostered. Nor do we find a discussion concerning the relevant contexts for deliberation or the necessary terms of this engagement. Most importantly, Howe does not spell out what democratic deliberation *itself* entails. This is a curious omission considering that it appears to serve as the linchpin for his adequacy framework.

Howe claims that the adequacy framework “places strict limits on the degree to which [inequalities] can lead to political advantage or positional advantage in obtaining other goods.” Given his affinity for Elizabeth Anderson’s take on adequacy, it is perhaps not surprising that we find this expressed in terms of integration. Without a trace of irony he remarks: “It is humanly possible to achieve integration and its goals per the adequacy framework.” (Those less interested in this vision of integration are simply dismissed as “democratic incompetents.”) These comments are puzzling given Howe’s insistence that the adequacy framework is an “instance of non-ideal theory” and further that equal citizenship must be “grounded in and responsive to actual human circumstances rather than idealized circumstances.” Tying a deliberative notion of citizenship to integration in particular underscores the difficulties of embracing a single framework or principle necessary for analyzing the complexities of socio-political and demographic phenomena. But similar to the aforementioned items, the integration claim eludes scrutiny when the conditions necessary for attaining it are simply left out.

Howe suggests that we forego the details of his argument, yet in the absence of specification, it is unclear to me how exactly we ought to assess the terms of his adequacy framework. Whatever the details of his view, a “humanly possible” notion of citizenship would have to be cognizant of sociological realities, including the complex set of reasons why spatial concentrations across the globe persistently emerge, as well as the complex set of reasons why well placed parents always will be able to secure advantages for themselves and their children, and how both of these things might bear upon his resolve that equal citizenship be acquired and honed collectively. Further, his argument would need to show how societies defined by sharp spatial concentrations and power disparities ever would be able to meet the deliberative requirements of adequacy.

I also think there are reasons to believe that adequacy, like equality, is easily co-opted for purposes that do not conform to Howe’s policy preferences. For example, does affirmative action help the disadvantaged as Howe seems to suppose, or does it possibly create new kinds of harms as well as assist merely in benefiting the better-off members of minority groups?¹ Does “integration” lead to the hopeful outcomes that Howe imagines, or, owing to both voluntary and involuntary forces in

democratic societies, does it more often than not advance the interests of those in dominant positions, as Howe's own example of "maximally maintained inequality" (MMI) seems to suggest?² Or take another example from his text. Howe suggests that the adequacy framework might "adopt parallel thresholds in employment, housing, income, and health care." But I am not sure how any framework could guarantee employment thresholds; the suggestion strikes me as very naive given the vicissitudes of our capitalist system (labour markets currently are haemorrhaging across Europe). With respect to the other items on this list, the *quality* and *efficacy* of each varies widely within and between countries and not always in the manner that liberals on either side of the ideological fence think it does.

In Howe's essay we are invited to think about the "real world." I welcome this. But if we do *that*, then I am inclined to think that both positions, owing to their high level of abstraction, probably are too optimistic about the contribution they are able to make to social justice, particularly as this applies to the profound influence of social class on parental behaviour. Indeed, one must wonder whether fine-tuning either one of these models actually will tip the scales very much in the direction of fairness, or whether — to paraphrase George Orwell³ — both approaches only gesture at fighting against injustice most of us only half-heartedly want to eliminate. After all, we egalitarian critics of morally arbitrary benefits are no less likely to exploit them when they work in our own children's favour.

Howe's aims in this essay were the following: (1) to defend the adequacy framework against criticisms from egalitarians; (2) to show how both frameworks have similar resources in their respective toolkits for tackling inequality; and finally (3) to suggest that the adequacy principle is better equipped than the equality principle to promote both fair educational opportunity and democratic citizenship. In my judgment Howe succeeds with the first two aims but fails with the third. He is right that the egalitarian principle is susceptible of being potentially negligent of abuses in the real world. But how does his own adequacy principle avoid similar abuse? Further, how exactly does his approach reduce political or positional advantage in obtaining other goods? Perhaps Howe has a compelling reply to these questions, but I could not find them in this essay.

1. See, for example, Dan Slater, "Does Affirmative Action Do What It Should?," *New York Times*, March 16, 2013.

2. For a discussion, see Michael Merry, *Equality, Citizenship and Segregation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

3. George Orwell, *A Collection of Essays* (New York: Harvest, 1942), 120.