

Equal Versus Equitable

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7/12/2024

Updated: 8/6/2024

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Commentary

You have two adult children, Alissa and Tony. They are twins. At the time of their birth, you had set up a trust account designated to go to them when they turned 30.

They are 29 years old now—happily married, each with two children. As twins, they share many of the same traits. But there is a significant difference between them. Alissa is a neurosurgeon, making \$400,000-plus a year. And Tony is a violinist in a regional orchestra, making an eighth of that.

Alissa has already developed a net worth of \$1 million and will likely become a decamillionaire before she turns 40. Tony has a net worth of zero and zero prospects for ever making a lot of money. He isn't complaining. Nor is he jealous of his sister. He's comfortable with the life he chose. And his wife and children are happy and thriving.

The trust account is worth \$1 million. If you move forward as planned, Tony and Alissa will each be \$500,000 richer on their next birthday. That will give Tony a net worth of \$500,000 and Alissa a net worth of \$1.5 million.

That's a good outcome for both of them. But is it fair?

Because of the advantages Alissa already has, one could argue that the right thing to do would be to give Tony the entire \$1 million. That would leave them each with the same net worth: \$1 million. They would be even.

Is that what you would do?

You know the answer. You would not. You would give them each \$500,000. Giving Tony a million and Alissa nothing would achieve an equal outcome, i.e., they would both end up with an equal net worth. But it would be insanely unfair.

It would be unfair to Alissa, who worked her entire life to get into and through medical school. She would feel, justifiably, that she had earned the net worth she has. And it would send the wrong message to Tony: that he is entitled to have the same net worth as his sister, even though he chose a profession that is poorly paid.

This little mental exercise is meant to illustrate an ethical and social argument that is raging in American culture today. And though it is unnoticed by many, it's beneath and/or behind some of the most important issues affecting every U.S. family, almost every U.S. company, our military, our educational institutions, and even the entertainment industry.

I'm talking about the distinction between equal and equitable.

2 Similar Words That Have Come to Mean 2 Very Different Things

The first principle stated by the Declaration of Independence—as every citizen knows—is that “all men are created equal.” And when Thomas Jefferson penned those words in 1776, he was talking about equality in terms of the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Of course, he didn't mean *all* men exactly. He wasn't suggesting that slaves had those equal rights. And his usage of “men” in this case did not include women with respect to such things as voting and property.

Some of these disparities were addressed in 1863 with the passage of the Emancipation Proclamation and in 1920 with the ratification of the 19th Amendment. And during the Civil Rights era, the term “equal rights” was used to include access by minorities to education, public facilities, and job opportunities.

This tells us something we should keep in mind: The original, constitutional definition of equality has been expanded to include additional rights that our Founding Fathers never even thought of.

Like equality, equitable derives from the Latin for “uniformity, impartiality, fairness.” And like equality, its meaning has evolved over the years.

Here are two simple dictionary definitions:

- Equality: The quality or state of being equal; having the same rights, social status, and so on;
- Equity: Fairness or justice in the way people are treated.

It's easy to understand what equality means. But equitable is a slippery fish. Going back to the mental exercise above, giving Alissa and Tony \$500,000 each would be, by definition, an equal action. But not necessarily an equitable one. And this difference, as I said, underpins arguments we are having today about just about every aspect of our lives.

Affirmative action is one example.

At one time, African Americans were not given equal opportunities for employment. The establishment of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) in 1965 helped, but the situation improved only marginally.

To remedy that, some businesses and educational institutions introduced their own affirmative action policies. The argument was that factors other than raw intelligence and hard work were holding minorities back. To make it fair, it was necessary for them to make adjustments to standards for minorities. The idea was something like "Just give them a leg up. They will get the rest of the way themselves."

I don't have a problem with that thinking. I have promoted affirmative action efforts in my businesses and in my personal life. Giving help to people who want help seems like a sensible course of action in all areas of human interaction. (How well affirmative action works, however, is a subject for another essay.)

But in recent years, the definition of equitable has expanded beyond "equal" or even "more-than-equal" opportunities and treatment. Today, when you hear equitable used in political or social debates it means *equal outcomes*.

It's not enough that everyone has an equal start. We must also guarantee an equal finish. And for those who espouse this line of thinking, that means equal outcomes in everything from childhood competitions, to test scores, to hiring and promotions, and wealth.

That is a problem.

The Only Measure of Achievement That Makes Sense

If our objective is equal outcomes, we must disregard all the factors that determine success in the real world. Such as aptitude. And ambition. And hard work. And persistence. And intellectual and emotional intelligence. And we must admit that affirmative action—and all laws, regulations, and protocols that provide disadvantaged communities with extra help and second chances—is not enough because it does not result in equal earnings.

Equal-outcome advocates are like parents who believe the fair thing is to give Tony the million and Alissa nothing, because they want their children to have equally happy and fulfilling lives. And for them, that means having an equal net worth.

They don't understand that giving each of them the same amount is giving them the same *opportunity*. Tony is every bit as smart and savvy as Alissa. He can invest and grow that money as well as she can. But they also know that Alissa has a big head start with her existing net worth and a much better financial future because of her income.

They don't want to face the reality that, unless something terrible happens to Alissa or Tony decides to give up music and get a job as, say, a plumber, Alissa and her family will continue to grow richer while Tony and his family may very well grow poorer.

They can't change those facts. But what they can do is make their children equal for a moment in time. That, and that alone, they can do. So, they will do it.

What they refuse to see is all the damage it will do—to both children and to the relationship between them, a topic worth digging into, but that is for another day.

Views expressed in this article are opinions of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Epoch Times.



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