Why egalitarians need history

Anne Phillips

Forthcoming in Society: Forum on Philosophy and History, 2025

In a recent essay on the relationship between philosophy and the history of philosophy, Susan James reminds us that there are still philosophers around who see these two as entirely separate activities.[1] Those attached to what she calls the 'Separation Thesis' see the role of philosophy as examining what is true. The different (and from this perspective, subordinate) work of excavating what earlier philosophers wrote adds little to this because it does not yet address the truth status of what they argued. 'True', in this context, has a specific meaning, for the truths supposedly pursued by philosophers are not the everyday truths of who broke the window or which biscuit has fewer calories but ones that involve, in the words of one proponent of the separation thesis, 'questions of stupendous generality'.[2] When understood in this way, philosophy needs neither to know its own history nor anything very substantial about the history of the world. As translated into the common-sense view of the philosopher, he appears aloof from the messy realities of daily life, not much burdened by empirical knowledge, nor overly compelled towards action.

This version of the philosopher has always been a bit of a travesty and is especially so now, given the large body of current work in applied philosophy or applied ethics. The *Society for Applied Philosophy*, founded in 1982, explicitly devotes itself to work with 'a direct bearing on areas of practical concern', and its now highly regarded *Journal* publishes articles on the environment, health, science and technology, education, race, gender, sexuality and the family. Notions of philosophers with their heads in the clouds then seem remarkably ill-informed. In earlier decades, political philosophers (the main focus of my arguments) tended to elaborate alternative ways of thinking about freedom or equality or justice or democracy, construct a case for one of the competing positions, and end with a brief addendum on the practical or policy implications. In the later world of applied philosophy, they are more likely to start from the other end: to start with a particular problem area, like the best policies to pursue as regards climate change, or migration, or the ethical challenges of new reproductive technology; review –sometimes in impressive detail – the state of current social science

[1] Susan James 'The Relationship between Philosophy and History', in Richard Bourke and Quentin Skinner (eds.) *History in the Humanities and Social Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).
[2] Timothy Williamson *Doing Philosophy* (Oxford University Press 2018); cited in James: 217.

knowledge in the field; and exercise the skills associated with philosophy (clarity of thought, precision of argument, the ability to make salient distinctions) to arrive at recommendations.

This turn towards more policy oriented political philosophy pretty much lays to rest the common caricature, not to mention the more overblown conception of philosophy as pursuing Truth with a capital 'T'. One could hardly say, of the many now working in applied philosophy or applied ethics, that they are indifferent to the knowledge produced in various branches of the social sciences or fail to engage with the most pressing problems of the contemporary world. So far as the importance of history goes, however, this turn towards making philosophy more 'practically' engaged has been less helpful, for it can make it even harder for philosophers to acknowledge the relevance of their own history, and sometimes even of historical work. in general. The claim and contribution of the philosopher comes to depend, not on any specific set of questions that uniquely engage philosophy, nor on any special knowledge of the ways key concepts reflect their historical context, but on philosophy's refined reasoning powers. What matters is the ability to identify and eliminate confusion. The philosopher's role is to disentangle the misleading ideas that had come to seem obvious 'merely' through previous influences from those that can stand the test of careful analysis and precise argument, and in this view, one might even see philosophy as the opposite of history. That something different was thought (or done) in the past carries neither weight nor significance.

Though I would never have put it so strongly, I have in the past had some sympathy for this view; or at least for the idea that delving into the history of political thought is admirable work for those who can do it but not strictly necessary for addressing current concerns. The historical figures whose work most interested me were from the relatively recent past – Wollstonecraft, Marx or J. S. Mill - and when I did venture further back, it was mainly via the insights of feminist writers exposing the often startling sexism of canonical writers. Feminists *do* take history seriously, and uncovering both the ideas of early feminist thinkers and the highly revealing assumptions about women in iconic male thought was one of the achievements of feminist political theory in the 1980s and 90s. But one can read this work (as I think I sometimes did) in ways that aren't themselves especially historical: reinforcing views already formed through contemporary analysis; reading for the pleasures of confirmation rather than engaging seriously with the historical material. If history matters to philosophy – and I now believe it very much does - it is because understanding the complex and often contradictory history of what we now take to be key concepts challenges and may thereby change how we understand and employ these concepts today. This means, I think, more than a history of ideas. It also means thinking about the economic and social context of those ideas, including the history of movements for change.

Writing twenty years ago on 'Why Philosophy Needs History', Bernard Williams argued that 'philosophical analysis without history encourages us to think that these concepts, so central to our thought, must always have existed, and that to the extent that members of oral

cultures did not recognise the distinctions, they were in a muddle'.[3] As regards specifically political philosophy, the key concepts might indeed seem to have been there from the beginning - Plato and Socrates on justice; Aristotle on democracy; the Stoics on cosmopolitanism – and the once standard approach to reading their work was to imagine that we and they were puzzling away at the self-same questions. For the most part (setting aside advocates of the separation thesis), this is no longer the case. The meanings people attach to seemingly recurrent notions are *not* stable through time nor identical across space; a coincidence of terms does *not* establish a coincidence of thought, and not only because translators may mistake their meaning. As Quentin Skinner and others have argued, those who write about political ideas do so for a purpose, typically to challenge what they see as mistaken approaches and put matters on what they consider a better footing.[4] Transposing the arguments and concepts from one century to another without enquiring what those at the time were arguing for and against, or just testing them out for coherence and consistency as if the historical context were entirely irrelevant, is unlikely to capture their significance.

Egalitarian theory 1: philosophy without history

In recent decades, political theorists working on issues of equality have been particularly prone to the separation of philosophy from history. For much of the later part of the twentieth century, they tended to proceed in more purely philosophical mode, with the 'problem' of equality understood as a matter of identifying exactly what it means. The starting point for many was a half-historical claim (the one space permitted to history) to the effect that we all now think equality matters but do not agree on what it is. Thus Ronald Dworkin argued that all 'plausible' political theories now agree that each person matters equally, Will Kymlicka that all now start from an 'egalitarian plateau', Tim Scanlon that 'basic moral equality is now widely accepted, even among people who reject substantive egalitarian claims'.[5] All the difficult and significant questions were thought to begin from this supposedly shared starting point.

If we say, for example, that in today's democracies all citizens are to be regarded as political equals, what exactly do we mean? It is easy enough to say that each should have a vote and none more than one, but beyond that, what does equal citizenship imply? One can hardly guarantee each person an equal level of influence on political decisions, given not only the power of money in politics, but the even more basic fact that politics involves discussion and debate and that some individuals will always be more articulate and persuasive than others. If we say that in today's multicultural societies, there should be equality of treatment between members of majority and minority cultural groups, what precisely would it take to

[3] Bernard Williams 'Why Philosophy Needs History' *London Review of Books*, 17 October 2002.

[4] Quentin Skinner 'Political Philosophy and the Uses of History' in Bourke and Skinner (eds) *History in the Humanities and Social Sciences*.

[5] Ronald Dworkin 'Comment on Narveson: a Defense of Equality' *Social Philosophy and Policy* 1/1 1983: 25; Will Kymlicka *Contemporary Political* Philosophy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), *4*-5; Timothy Scanlon *Why Does Inequality Matter?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2018: 4.

achieve this, given that cultural differences might include substantially different views even on equality or freedom, and that cultural majorities are by definition numerically dominant? What, moreover, are we seeking to equalise: freedom, opportunities, resources, capabilities, levels of well-being? Different people have different needs: to take one obvious illustration, the person with significant mobility problems needs more resources than the one who is (currently) able-bodied to achieve an equal level of welfare, so merely distributing resources equally will leave people unequal in their quality of life. People also have different ideas of what counts as quality of life, hence the otherwise surprisingly large literature devoted to the question of whether someone who has cultivated a taste for fine wines, and would be miserable drinking the usual supermarket product, requires a wine subsidy in order to be treated as an equal. (Nobody thought he did, but why not?).[6] The heart of this kind of exercise is philosophical not historical, and as practised by leading theorists frequently took the form of philosophical thought experiments, like the fine wines one, as a means of establishing and refining equality's meaning. The premium throughout was on clarity of thought, and if earlier writers meant something different by equality, that was hardly our problem.

More recently, the focus shifted from the what of equality to the why. The starting point is similar - that half-historical claim about the now widespread belief in our basic moral equality - but the question is no longer, or not yet, the ramifications of this. The question is what grounds such a belief. Human beings are various, and as regards many of our characteristics, not obviously equal. What is it that nonetheless justifies the idea that we are all, in some important sense, of equal worth? These investigations too have proceeded in largely philosophical mode, with different theorists offering different candidates –our superior cognitive capacities, our capacity for moral agency, the essential dignity of the human being - as the reasons for human equality.[7] History, again, is mostly absent, though in one important recent exception, Paul Sagar argues that what gives meaning to the idea of humans as basic equals are not 'facts' about ourselves that somehow ground the equality, but developments in our moral and political culture that lead us to immerse ourselves in what he describes as the 'fiction' of basic equality.[8] History comes in here, though in an oddly parochial way: Sagar sees the commitment to equality as mainly a feature of the West; he roughly dates the fiction of basic equality to the period since the Second World War; and regards it as such a recent phenomenon that the more elderly amongst us haven't yet caught up with the programme.

Exclusively philosophical approaches to equality have not served us well, one problem being precisely that representation of people in the modern period as taking it for granted

[6] I am thinking here especially of the debates between Dworkin and G A Cohen on 'the problem' of expensive tastes. Dworkin So*vereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press,2000); G. A. Cohen 'Expensive taste rides again' in J. Burley (ed.) *Dworkin and His Critics* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004); Dworkin, 'Ronald Dworkin replies' ,in Burley (ed.) *Dworkin and His Critics.*

[7] As in the recent collection edited by Giacomo Floris and Nicolas Kirby *How Can We Be Equals? Basic Equality: its Meaning, Explanation, and Scope* (Oxford University Press, 2024).

[8] Paul Sagar *Basic Equality* (Princeton University Press, 2024).

that equality – of some kind - matters. More attention to history would surely have helped here. The idea that equality matters is certainly not unique to the modern era; to the contrary, there have been persistent denunciations of and mobilisations against hierarchy and inequality throughout written history, and to the extent that we can tell, also before. Darrin McMahon begins his history of *Equality* with cave drawings from a Stone Age site near Valencia in Spain, dating back at least to 6500 BCE, and seeming to depict the banishment (or execution) of group members who got above themselves and came to think themselves more important than the rest.[9] Nor is it the case that a belief in basic human equality is by now the default position; to the contrary, much of contemporary politics remains premised on the inferiority of large groups of people, who are treated as lesser by virtue of their gender, ethnicity, sexuality or religion. This is true in the West as well as in regions of the world more starkly divided by religion and ethnicity. When Elisabeth Anderson criticised the 'luck-egalitarianism' of the 1980s and 90s, it was both for their focus on the distribution of 'things' (the preoccupation with the 'what' of equality), and for their failure to engage with the politics of actual egalitarian movements. As she noted, these typically mobilised against racism, sexism, homophobia, and the many other ways in which our standing as equals is denied; they give the lie, that is, to fantasies of even a Western world of basic equals.[10] A more serious engagement with either the politics or history of egalitarianism might have tempered what otherwise looks like a kind of triumphalism about current norms and ideas.

The lack of attention to history is also a loss in a more general way, for in coming to understand the different meanings and imaginings associated with past ideas of equality, we come to appreciate better their complexities and contradictions. We learn how frequently, for example, equality has been linked to inequality, how widespread are the exclusions, and how readily claims to equality in one sphere can become a justification for hierarchies in another. In principle, at least, greater knowledge of that historical material encourages us to explore similar complexities in the meanings attached to equality today, though part of my argument is that this greater illumination is by no means guaranteed. Philosophers need history, but history can be deployed in more ideological ways that serve primarily to bolster self-esteem, or can lead to disillusionment and despair. Adding history to the mix is not a magical solution, and much depends on how one uses that history.

Egalitarian theory 2: putting the history back in

For obvious reasons, feminists working on equality have been less convinced than others that we do now live in a world that assumes basic equality, and mostly dismissive of the need to justify or explain why women should be regarded as equals. The main common ground with other work on equality is that feminist political theory has also been preoccupied with meanings, in particular the different meanings attached to equality, sameness, and

[9] Darrin M McMahon *Equality: The History of an Elusive Idea* (Ithaka Press, 2024). See also David Lay Williams for an account of how political theorists from Plato onwards criticised economic inequality. *The Greatest of all Plagues: How Economic Inequality Shaped Political Thought from Plato to Marx*, *(*Princeton University Press, 2024).
[10] Elisabeth Anderson 'What is the Point of Equality' *Ethics* 1999,109:2, pp. 287–337.

difference. The idea that gender equality means women becoming 'the same' as men was quickly discarded: why would anyone choose to pursue such a limited goal? The more challenging questions revolved around the relationship between gender equality and gender neutrality: whether equality means dismantling every vestige of gender differentiation in laws, regulations, and practices, removing not only any prohibition but also any protection that might treat women differently from men, perhaps even looking askance on any gendered division of labour. This has considerable plausibility as an understanding of gender equality - except that gendered power is so thoroughly embedded in the structures of society that pursuing policies of neutrality or impartiality may simply reinforce existing hierarchies.

Feminist work on this has typically been grounded in history and informed by historical debates. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, for example, there was considerable division among feminists over the protective legislation that limited women's hours of work and prevented them from undertaking certain kinds of nightwork or working underground in the mines. Some viewed this as protection not for women but rather for men, denying women access to higher paid areas of work. These called for equal (gender neutral) rights to every kind of employment. Others countered that removing the limits on the exploitation of women's work would only increase their vulnerability and make their lives worse; they also pointed out that what might be advantageous for women trying to enter male middle-class occupations like medicine or law might be less advantageous for those relying on manual work. In a related and more recent debate, feminists considered the use of quotas as a necessary mechanism to increase women's political representation. Seventy-five years after women had first been permitted to stand for election to Parliament in Britain, the proportion of women MPs remained at less than 10 percent. Eventually despairing at the failures of exhortation, the Labour Party introduced all-women short lists – only women could apply - for the selection of candidates in a target number of constituencies. Though the policy was struck down by an industrial tribunal after two disgruntled male party members objected that it discriminated against men, legislation in 2002 has since made it legal for political parties to employ this kind of positive discrimination. As both examples indicate, there are situations in which treating women differently from men might be the best way to improve their condition relative to men - but is this recognition of the salience of gender difference to be regarded as transitional (a temporary measure till we achieve full equality) or something more permanent?

In one particularly significant contribution, Joan Scott (historian *and* philosopher) describes the relationship between equality and difference as the 'constitutive paradox of feminism', for in campaigning against the multiple ways in which women are excluded, exploited, or regulated because of what are assumed to be the characteristics of their gender, feminism seems to call back into existence the very gender distinctions it seeks to reject. As Scott puts it:

> Feminism was a protest against women's political exclusion: its goal was to eliminate "sexual difference" in politics, but it had to make its claims on behalf of "women" (who

were discursively produced through "sexual difference"). To the extent that it acted for "women", feminism produced the "sexual difference" it sought to eliminate.[11]

As this suggests, one cannot so easily disentangle equality from difference nor consider it a matter of binary choice between focusing on the one over focusing on the other. The paradox – that one cannot fight against the restrictions of gender without in some way invoking and even reinforcing its power – may be something we have to continue to grapple with.

Scott proposes this in an analysis of the history of French feminism, but her argument has more general purchase. It suggests that what philosophers sometimes pose as an either/or choice – a matter of discerning which is more logical or correct - cannot always be resolved through more careful delineation of meaning: that sometimes seeming opposites are inextricably intertwined. That same intertwining of opposites has become an especially prominent theme in recent historical work on equality, which has established not only how varied the meanings attached to equality in different periods, or how risky it can be to read older versions through the lens of contemporary understandings, but also how frequently equality is laced with inequality. This point is central, for example, to Siep Stuurman's *The Invention of Humanit*y, which argues that the rise of 'modern equality' –those grand proclamations about all men being born free and equal associated with the Enlightenment– was simultaneous with the rise of 'modern *in*equality'. He cites the political economy that provided seemingly compelling reasons for socio-economic inequality; the new theories of sexual difference that made men and women seem like species apart; the racial taxonomies that claimed a biologically grounded hierarchy of humans; and the developmental histories that represented non-Europeans as still in the age of childhood.[12] All these were as much a characteristic of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as were the arguments and mobilisations for equality.

This was not, moreover, just a matter of simultaneous moves in two different directions, for in many ways and at many moments the inequality was built into the equality. The appeals to 'nature', for example, that characterised much European thought on equality from the seventeenth century onwards worked at the same time as justifications for hierarchy and gradation.[13] Men were depicted as rough equals in a pre-political state of nature, as not sufficiently differentiated to deliver any clear reasons why some should rule and others be ruled; and by the eighteenth century, were depicted as not only *born* free and equal but remaining so. Yet when supposed facts of nature become the basis for equality claims, this creates alibis for dismissing some as naturally inferior. If 'nature' makes us equals, then presumed *differences* of nature, like those of gender or 'race', can be deemed to make us *un*equal. How else are we to explain the stark contradiction between those famous

[11] Joan Wallach Scott *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1997), 3-4.
[12] Siep Stuurman *The Invention of Humanity* (Harvard University Press, 2017)
[13] Anne Phillips *Unconditional Equals* (Princeton University Press, 2021), 'When Equality Needs No Justification' in Floris and Kirby (eds.) *How Can We Be Equals*.

proclamations of 'natural' equality - 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal' (*American Declaration of Independence*, 1776); 'Men are born free and remain equal in rights' (*French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*, 1789) – and the exclusion of the vast majority of humankind: women, obviously, but also the propertyless, the enslaved, the Native Americans, the colonised and the soon-to-be colonised? Devin Vartija traces part of this story in his study of the eighteenth- century French encyclopaedists, whose fascination with nature simultaneously enabled both their social critique and a penchant for racial classification.[14] McMahon's *Equality* has a longer historical sweep but is similarly informed, not just by a dialectic between equality and hierarchy in which the one recurrently calls forth the other, but by the way hierarchical assumptions and exclusions get built into the very imaginings of equality. These arguments draw on and are confirmed by years of historical scholarship: by feminists exploring how it was that the natural equality of men so ingeniously combined with the natural inequality of women;[15] by scholars of empire exploring how it was that the high-minded liberals of the nineteenth century nonetheless condoned colonialism; [16] by anti-slavery campaigners observing the stark contrast between American declarations of freedom and equality and the brutal realities of slavery.[17] The history tells us how persistently people have fought for equality and resisted hierarchy. It also alerts us to the complexities and contradictions of each of these moments.

Through much of history, ideals of equality have been articulated that turned out to depend on simultaneous practices of inequality. The Greeks did not just 'fail' to extend their ideas of citizenship to women and slaves. They could hardly have conceived their version of active democracy that involved the rotation of offices and involvement of all citizens in decision-making assemblies had there not been an army of *non*-citizens sustaining daily life. When the European settlers of America challenged pre-existing hierarchies and embraced what de Tocqueville saw as an astonishing level of social equality, they were aided in this by the ready availability of land. That land only became 'readily available' because the settlers refused the status of equals to the indigenous Americans who had previously occupied it. In these and other instances, it is not that the ideal of equality was imperfectly practiced or insufficiently extended. These were understandings and practices of equality that only became possible because they were *not* extended to all. With all its promises of inclusion, equality often turns out to depend on extensive exclusion.

A new 'separation thesis'?

[14] Devin Vartija *The Color of Equality (*University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021).
[15] As in Carole Pateman *The Sexual Contract* Polity Press, 1988
[16] Uday Singh Mehta *Liberalism and Empire* (University of Chicago Press, 1999); Jennifer Pitts *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and Europe* (Princeton University Press, 2005).
[17] Frederick Douglass 'What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?' in Philip Foner (ed) *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*. (Lawrence Hill Books, 1999).

Knowing something of the history of equality – of the different meanings attached to it in different periods and the different claims made in its name – changes how we think about and act on equality claims today. But the messages of history are never straightforward, and the effects of increased historical knowledge are not always what an egalitarian would desire. First, uncovering seemingly endless combinations of equality with inequality can lead to scepticism about whether equality is in any sense a worthwhile goal. It can become so tainted by its history that it loses the power to inspire. One finds strains of this in critiques of the dishonesty of colonial governments who claimed the high moral ground of their civilising mission yet saw this as entirely compatible with the forced labour and brutal punishments inflicted on many of their colonial subjects. Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon were especially scathing of the French with their self-congratulatory talk of the Rights of Man: 'this Europe', as Fanon put it, 'where they have never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them, at the corner of every one of their own streets, in all the corners of the globe.'[18] And even beyond the especially stark example of colonialism, the accumulation of episodes in which assertions of equality live in seeming harmony with gross inequality can lead to scepticism about the possibility of *any* group of people consistently pursuing egalitarian ideals. There are strains of this in McMahon's *Equality,* which represents human beings as simultaneously driven by a determination not to see others lording it over them and a determination to ensure that, if there *is* to be power, they get it not others.

The other common response to histories of equality and inequality is more optimistic but more complacent. It introduces what one might describe as a new kind of 'separation thesis', one that firmly distinguishes the mistakes and inadequacies of the past from the since corrected understandings and practices of the present. The history of unequal equalities is now more widely disseminated: it is more widely taught in history of political thought courses, but has also entered more fully into general knowledge, as in the now much stronger recognition of the role of slavery in the history and economy of the UK. Where people might previously have glossed over inequalities, or simply not known how extensive they were, there is now a greater willingness to acknowledge that much earlier talk of equality was contradictory, or at least incomplete. Too often, however, things stop there. These were different times, people say, when 'of course' it was very difficult to think of women as the equals of men or of slavery as brutality. My inclination, at this point, is to say we need yet more history, for one can hardly say people were incapable of thinking such heretical thoughts when the evidence of early feminist writings and anti-slavery arguments demonstrates that many in fact did. But this evidence too can always be accommodated as individual exceptions. The earlier exclusions are then represented as reflecting understandable failures of imagination or perhaps less defensible failures of moral will, but the ideas articulated in them are seen as containing the germs of what 'we' think today. Joe

[18] Frantz Fanon. *The Wretched of the Earth*. (Penguin, 1963) (first published 1961): 251. Aimé Césaire *Discourse on Colonialism*. (Monthly Review Press, 2000 - first published 1950).

Biden said something along these lines in the speech gave in July 2024 explaining why he was not running for a second presidential term.

> America is an idea, an idea stronger than any army, bigger than any ocean, more powerful than any dictator or tyrant. It's the most powerful idea in the history of the world…That idea is that we hold these truths to be self-evident. We're all created equal, endowed by our creator with certain inalienable rights: life, liberty, pursuit of happiness. *We've never fully lived up to it, to this sacred idea, but we've never walked away from it either* (my italics), and I do not believe the American people will walk away from it now.[19]

When historical error is separated too sharply from contemporary correctness, we risk falling into a version of what Amia Srinavasan has termed 'genealogical luck'.[20] We acknowledge, that is, that historical context matters, acknowledge that it shapes the ways people in the past thought about or acted on their ideas of equality, but seem to assume that this context has no similar effect on us. The ancient Greeks thought equality compatible with slavery; so too did those who proclaimed the American Republic; so too, at least in the first years, did the French revolutionaries with their misleading 'Rights of Man'. We know better. This way of thinking accepts, as a general observation, that people's ideas and imaginings are shaped, enabled, and limited by their historical context, producing what later generations may see as indefensible elisions and exclusions. It implies, by extension, that our own ideas and imaginings must be shaped, enabled and limited in similar ways, otherwise we have to claim some unique exemption from the general pattern. If we nonetheless want to insist that our more consistent understandings and practices of equality are the 'right ones', it seems we must imagine ourselves as benefitting (uniquely) from good genealogical luck. In our case, though not in those of our predecessors, the always contingent formation of ideas has produced correct knowledge. We were born into a moment when the two manage to coincide.

This is not a position one would expect philosophers to adopt – it rather too obviously lacks the clarity of thought and weeding out of inconsistency that is supposed to attach to philosophical work– but versions of it still surface in unexpected places. Frankfurt School critical theory, for example, is broadly characterised by an integration of socio-historical analysis with normative political theory: its practitioners offer compelling analyses of socio-cultural- economic trends within capitalism and modernity, and identify through these the obstacles to and possibilities of emancipation from oppressive power. This is a long way from philosophical thought experiments that seek, in isolation from any specific context, to clarify the meaning and extent of equality. In contrast to those, it looks very much embedded in

[19] President Joe Biden, Address to the Nation, July 24, 2024

[20] Amia Srinivasan 'Genealogy, Epistemology and World-Making' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* CXIX, part 2, 2019: pp127-156.

socio-historical work. But as some critics have argued,[21] even that history can replicate the kind of developmental schemas Stuurman identified as part of the rise of modern *in*equality. In Habermas' account of normative development, for example, the resources of European modernity are understood as the product of a historical process of socio-cultural learning: this is an analysis that clearly recognises the historical formation of ideas and values, and the way norms and concepts develop in relation to historical conditions. He takes it, however, as one implication of this that the normative resources of European modernity are the best currently available to us. We are all shaped by context, yet somehow 'we' (European moderns) have ended up with the best. There is too little appreciation in this of the ways in which progress might go backwards, or the possibility that the 'best' might take shape in a different region of the world.

When it comes to equality, there is little evidence of unilinear progress. It is not the case that the scope of equality, understood as the proportion of the world's population included in the community of equals, steadily expands. It *has* expanded, yes, but sometimes it shrinks. Nor is it the case that imaginings of equality become steadily more ambitious, moving from a rather empty 'equality in the sight of God', towards 'equality in the eyes of the law', through claims for universal suffrage, until finally insisting on significant levels of material equality. If one stood back from the details, one could just about discern some such line of progress, but to do so one would have to overlook major interruptions and reverses: one would have to overlook much of history. Consider what was celebrated not so long ago as the 'end of history' and culmination of a long, mostly steady, progress towards the near inevitable dominance of democratic systems. This now strikes most people as wishful thinking. Consider the reversal of what appeared, through the first half of the twentieth century, a steady movement in the direction of greater material equality, sustained indeed partly by the demands unleashed by universal suffrage for higher taxation on the rich and better welfare provision for the rest. In the course of the 1970s and 80s, that optimistic process went into reverse, most notably in the English-speaking countries of the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, Canada and New Zealand, and there was an unprecedented surge in the share of total income and wealth taken by the top .1%.[22] Over the same period, there was a significant reduction in global poverty, with growth in the Indian and Chinese economies taking an estimated billion people out of absolute poverty; but these developments too have been accompanied by startling levels of domestic inequality. In many parts of the world, the gap between top and bottom incomes is now far beyond what anyone could have previously imagined - beyond, indeed, what any of us can now dream of closing.

As regards ideas and imaginings of equality, it is notable how readily and depressingly these have adjusted to the reduced landscape. For many people today, the extraordinary

[21] Amy Allen *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (Columbia University Press, 2016).

[22] Thomas Piketty *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014); Anthony B Atkinson, Thomas Piketty, and Emmanuel Saez 'Top Incomes in the Long Run of History'. *Journal of Economic Literature*, 49/1 (2011): 3–71.

wealth of the world's richest individuals now seems to inspire awe and admiration rather than any sense of injustice, while flawed ideas of meritocracy have successfully embedded themselves in much of the popular imagination. When Michael Young coined the term in the 1950s, it was as part of a satirical attack on educational and social developments that selected on the basis of presumed merit and elevated to top positions the 'brilliant class, the 5% of the nation who know what 5% means'.[23] Young was particularly concerned with the way a focus on intelligence, especially as measured by the narrow gauge of educational qualifications and intelligence tests, reduced the plurality of human virtues and talents to a single axis, marking those who failed in the social competition as lesser beings. In societies organised on the basis of merit, the successful come to think that they really do deserve their position - that they are indeed the best - while the unsuccessful are left facing the unpalatable truth of their inferiority. Allocating positions on the basis of (educational) merit may look like a good egalitarian principle, and is surely an advance on allocating by birth or wealth; but it is hard to square either Michael Young's version of meritocracy or the one we live with today with the supposedly contemporaneous notion that we are all, in some important sense, of equal worth.

Historical work, at its best, helps us recognise these tensions, paradoxes, sometimes even straight contradictions, in the ideas and practices of equality, and in doing so can alert us to continuing problems today. At its best, it also protects against simpler expectations of progress or overly triumphalist celebrations of where we have arrived. It is not, however, always at its best, for history can be deployed to more ideological effect in ways that serve mainly to bolster national self-esteem. We see this in histories of empire whose main object is to present the former imperialists in better light, and more generally in Whiggish histories of ideas of equality that see them as stages in the occasionally interrupted but ultimately unstoppable progress to our own more enlightened time: what Teresa Bejan calls 'the just-so stories of inevitable unfolding in the historical progress of equality on which political theorists continue to rely'.[24] That celebratory intent also appears in binary contrasts between tradition and modernity that represent 'us' as beneficiaries of a trajectory from pre-modern worlds where each had his or her ordained place in the social hierarchy to the supposedly free and equal world of today; these contrasts become still more pernicious when the pre-modern is seen as existing contemporaneously with the modern, but located within different 'cultures' or different parts of the globe.

The challenge for philosophers is to take history seriously enough to accept the way it complicates that search for Truth with a capital 'T'. One could, perhaps, just ignore history – ignore both the history of philosophy and the history of the world in which we live – though adopting such an approach seriously weakens the contributions philosophy can make. What

[23] Michael Young *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, (Thames and Hudson, 1958), 83.

[24] Teresa Bejan "'Since All the World Is Mad, Why Should Not I Be So?" Mary Astell on Equality, Hierarchy, and Ambition'. *Political Theory*, 47/6 (2019):781-808, at 799. For a particularly effective marriage of the political theory and intellectual history of equality, see her *First Among Equals: Ideas of Equality and the Demand for Standing* (Harvard University Press, 2025) forthcoming.

one cannot do is take the bits of history that work for you while refusing their wider implications. If the exclusions and gradations that marked so many previous ideas and practices of equality are to be explained (excused?) by reference to aspects of their historical context, then we have to accept the implication as regards our own historical context. It makes no sense to see ourselves as uniquely exempt, or to fall into the delusion that current ideas and practices represent the highest stage. Maybe they do, but there is no way we can prove this, and meanwhile it is better to accept (as indeed many philosophers through history have done) the partial and provisional nature of our conclusions. None of this is intended to suggest that ideas of equality are so tainted by their history that we would do better to abandon them; for myself, I continue to regard the commitment to equality as the most compelling ethical and political commitment human beings can make to one another. It is not, however, a commitment that can be 'proven' or 'justified' by careful philosophical examination of meanings. It is, ultimately, a matter of politics.