THE ISSUE OF DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE—that is, how should a society’s wealth be allocated to individuals—brings to a head the division between “libertarian” and “egalitarian” liberals. Libertarians uphold the right of the individual to pursue his or her private interests, free from governmental interference—especially the right to acquire and dispose of private property. Egalitarians believe in the right of every individual to full self-development, which necessarily means that everyone must have the right to adequate food, shelter, clothing, education, health care, and other “social goods.”

These two notions inexorably come into conflict. For example, to provide everyone with enough food, shelter, education, and health care, we must take more from the wealthy members of the society in order to meet the needs of those less well off. Thus “egalitarian” rights and freedoms always come at the expense of “libertarian” rights and freedoms, especially property rights. Are individuals entitled to keep as much wealth as they are able to acquire by honest means? Do they have a right to an equal share of the basic necessities of life in order to develop as autonomous human beings? If your answer to both of these questions is yes, how might we balance the two sets of rights?

In the article below, Ronald Dworkin tries to clarify the nature of the tension within liberalism between the concept of “liberty” and that of “equality.” Specifically, libertarian liberals strongly support the concept of liberty, which to them means the right of individuals to be free of governmental interference in the use and dispensation of their private property and wealth. Egalitarian liberals stress the concept of equality, which they interpret as the right of individuals to have equal dignity and respect and to lead lives of their own choosing.

Dworkin clearly does not endorse the socialist ideal of equality of results, or outcome; that is, of dividing all social goods equally among all citizens. By equality, he means something called “equality of worth,” or “equality of opportunity”—that is, to live in a society of true liberty, every-
one must be able to compete for education, jobs, etc. from the same starting point. Such equality requires equal access to social resources.

Granted, this kind of equality would also require some redistribution of private wealth. After all, in a society that has wide gaps in income levels, the very poor do not have the same chance to benefit from educational and other “goods” generated by their society. To “level the playing field,” Dworkin argues, society needs to level incomes so that all citizens have an equal sense of self-respect, dignity, and worth. Only in this way can all individuals feel a sense of commitment to and participation in their society.

As you read this selection, ask yourself whether you agree that everyone has a right to respect and dignity. If so, does protecting this right require equal access to good schools and other forms of social wealth? If it does, do we need to tax the rich to give to the poor? How much of your own future earnings are you willing to share with those less fortunate? Do people who are poorer than you have a right to a proportion of your income? Do you have a right to keep all the revenue you earn?

Though liberalism is often discussed as a single political theory, there are in fact two basic forms of liberalism and the distinction between them is of great importance. Both argue against the legal enforcement of private morality—both argue against the Moral Majority’s views of homosexuality and abortion, for example—and both argue for greater sexual, political, and economic equality. But they disagree about which of these two traditional liberal values is fundamental and which derivative. Liberalism based on neutrality takes as fundamental the idea that government must not take sides on moral issues, and it supports only such egalitarian measures as can be shown to be the result of that principle. Liberalism based on equality takes as fundamental that government treat its citizens as equals, and insists on moral neutrality only to the degree that equality requires it.

The difference between these two versions of liberalism is crucial because both the content and appeal of liberal theory depends on which of these two values is understood to be its proper ground. Liberalism based on neutrality finds its most natural defense in some form of moral skepticism, and this makes it vulnerable to the charge that liberalism is a negative theory.

for uncommitted people. Moreover it offers no effective argument against
utilitarian and other contemporary justifications for economic inequality, and
therefore provides no philosophical support for those who are appalled at the
Reagan administration’s economic program. Liberalism based on equality
suffers from neither of these defects. It rests on a positive commitment to an
egalitarian morality and provides, in that morality, a firm contrast to the eco-
nomics of privilege.

In this essay I shall set out what I believe are the main principles of lib-
eralism based on equality. This form of liberalism insists that government
must treat people as equals in the following sense. It must impose no sacri-
fice or constraint on any citizen in virtue of an argument that the citizen
could not accept without abandoning his sense of his equal worth. This
abstract principle requires liberals to oppose the moralism of the New Right
because no self-respecting person who believes that a particular way to live
is most valuable for him can accept that this way of life is base or degrading.
No self-respecting atheist can agree that a community in which religion is
mandatory is for that reason finer, and no one who is homosexual that the
eradication of homosexuality makes the community purer.

So liberalism as based on equality justifies the traditional liberal princi-
ple that government should not enforce private morality of this sort. But it
has an economic as well as a social dimension. It insists on an economic sys-
tem in which no citizen has less than an equal share of the community’s
resources just in order that others may have more of what he lacks. I do not
mean that liberalism insists on what is often called “equality of result;” that
is, that citizens must each have the same wealth at every moment of their
lives. A government bent on the latter ideal must constantly redistribute
wealth, eliminating whatever inequalities in wealth are produced by market
transactions. But this would be to devote unequal resources to different lives.
Suppose that two people have very different bank accounts, in the middle of
their careers, because one decided not to work, or not to work at the most
lucrative job he could have found, while the other single-mindedly worked
for gain. Or because one was willing to assume especially demanding or
responsible work, for example, which the other declined. Or because one
took larger risks which might have been disastrous but which were in fact
successful, while the other invested conservatively. The principle that people
must be treated as equals provides no good reason for redistribution in these
circumstances; on the contrary, it provides a good reason against it.
For treating people as equals requires that each be permitted to use, for the projects to which he devotes his life, no more than an equal share of the resources available for all, and we cannot compute how much any person has consumed, on balance, without taking into account the resources he has contributed as well as those he has taken from the economy. The choices people make about work and leisure and investment have an impact on the resources of the community as a whole, and this impact must be reflected in the calculation equality demands. If one person chooses work that contributes less to other people’s lives than different work he might have chosen, then, although this might well have been the right choice for him, given his personal goals, he has nevertheless added less to the resources available for others, and this must be taken into account in the egalitarian calculation. If one person chooses to invest in a productive enterprise rather than spend his funds at once, and if his investment is successful because it increases the stock of goods or services other people actually want, without coercing anyone, his choice has added more to social resources than the choice of someone who did not invest, and this, too, must be reflected in any calculation of whether he has, on balance, taken more than his share.

This explains, I think, why liberals have in the past been drawn to the idea of a market as a method of allocating resources. An efficient market for investment, labor, and goods works as a kind of auction in which the cost to someone of what he consumes, by way of goods and leisure, and the value of what he adds, through his productive labor or decisions, is fixed by the amount his use of some resource costs others, or his contributions benefit them, in each case measured by their willingness to pay for it. Indeed, if the world were very different from what it is, a liberal could accept the results of an efficient market as *defining* equal shares of community resources. If people start with equal amounts of wealth, and have roughly equal levels of raw skill, then a market allocation would ensure that no one could properly complain that he had less than others, over his whole life. He could have had the same as they if he had made the decisions to consume, save, or work that they did.

But in the real world people do not start their lives on equal terms, some begin with marked advantages of family wealth or of formal and informal education. Others suffer because their race is despised. Luck plays a further and sometimes devastating part in deciding who gains or keeps jobs everyone wants. Quite apart from these plain inequities, people are not equal in raw skill or intelligence or other native capacities; on the contrary, they differ
greatly, through no choice of their own, in the various capacities that the market tends to reward. So some people who are perfectly willing, even anxious, to make exactly the choices about work and consumption and savings that other people make end up with fewer resources, and no plausible theory of equality can accept this as fair. This is the defect of the ideal fraudulently called “equality of opportunity”: fraudulent because in a market economy people do not have equal opportunity who are less able to produce what others want.

So a liberal cannot, after all, accept the market results as defining equal shares. His theory of economic justice must be complex, because he accepts two principles which are difficult to hold in the administration of a dynamic economy. The first requires that people have, at any point in their lives, different amounts of wealth insofar as the genuine choices they have made have been more or less expensive or beneficial to the community, measured by what other people want for their lives. The market seems indispensable to this principle. The second requires that people not have different amounts of wealth just because they have different inherent capacities to produce what others want, or are differently favored by chance. This means that market allocations must be corrected in order to bring some people closer to the share of resources they would have had but for these various differences of initial advantage, luck, and inherent capacity.

Obviously any practical program claiming to respect both these principles will work imperfectly and will inevitably involve speculation, compromise, and arbitrary lines in the face of ignorance. For it is impossible to discover, even in principle, exactly which aspects of any person’s economic position flow from his choices and which from advantages or disadvantages that were not matters of choice; and even if we could make this determination for particular people, one by one, it would be impossible to develop a tax system for the nation as a whole that would leave the first in place and repair only the second. There is therefore no such thing as the perfectly just program of redistribution. We must be content to choose whatever programs we believe bring us closer to the complex and unattainable ideal of equality, all things considered, than the available alternatives, and be ready constantly to reexamine that conclusion when new evidence or new programs are proposed.

Nevertheless, in spite of the complexity of that ideal, it may sometimes be apparent that a society falls far short of any plausible interpretation of its requirements. It is, I think, apparent that the United States falls far short now. A substantial minority of Americans are chronically unemployed or earn
wages below any realistic “poverty line” or are handicapped in various ways or burdened with special needs; and most of these people would do the work necessary to earn a decent living if they had the opportunity and capacity. Equality of resources would require more rather than less redistribution than we now offer.

This does not mean, of course, that we should continue past liberal programs, however inefficient these have proved to be, or even that we should insist on “targeted” programs of the sort some liberals have favored—that is, programs that aim to provide a particular opportunity or resource, like education or medicine, to those who need it. Perhaps a more general form of transfer, like a negative income tax, would prove on balance more efficient and fairer, in spite of the difficulties in such schemes. And whatever devices are chosen for bringing distribution closer to equality of resources, some aid undoubtedly goes to those who have avoided rather than sought jobs. This is to be regretted, because it offends one of the two principles that together make up equality of resources. But we come closer to that ideal by tolerating this inequity than by denying aid to the far greater number who would work if they could. If equality of resources were our only goal, therefore, we could hardly justify the present retreat from redistributive welfare programs.

We must therefore consider a further and more difficult question. Must liberals insist on equality of resources no matter what the cost to the national economy as a whole? It is far from obvious that treating people as equals forbids any deviation from equality of resources for any reason whatsoever. On the contrary, people with a lively sense of their own equal worth, and pride in their own convictions, can nevertheless accept certain grounds for carrying special burdens for the sake of the community as a whole. In a defensive war, for example, we expect those who are capable of military service to assume a vastly greater share of danger than others. Nor is inequality permissible only in emergencies when the survival of the community is at stake. We might think it proper, for example, for the government to devote special resources to the training of exceptionally talented artists or musicians, beyond what the market would pay for the services these artists produce, even though this reduces the share others have. We accept this not because we think that the life of an artist is inherently more valuable than other lives, but because a community with a lively cultural tradition provides an environment within which citizens may live more imaginatively, and in which they might take pride. Liberalism need not be insensitive to these and similar virtues of community. The question
becomes not whether any deviation is permitted, but what reasons for deviation are consistent with equal concern and respect.

That question is now pressing for this reason. Many economists believe that reducing economic inequality through redistribution is damaging to the general economy and, in the long run, self-defeating. Welfare programs, it is said, are inflationary, and the tax system necessary to support them depresses incentive and therefore production. The economy, it is claimed, can be restimulated only by reducing taxes and adopting other programs that will, in the short run, produce high unemployment and otherwise cause special damage to those already at the bottom of the economy. But this damage will only be temporary. For a more dynamic economy will produce prosperity, and this will in the end provide more jobs and more money for the handicapped and others truly needy.

Each of these propositions is doubtful, and they may well all be wrong. But suppose we were to accept them. Do they make a case for ignoring those in the economic cellar now? The argument would be unanswerable, of course, if everyone who lost because of stringent policies now would actually be better off in the long run. But though this is often suggested in careless supply-side rhetoric, it is absurd. People laid off for several years, with no effective retraining, are very unlikely to recoup their losses later, particularly if their psychological losses are counted. Children denied adequate nutrition or any effective chance of higher education will suffer permanent loss even if the economy follows the most optimistic path of recovery. Some of those who are denied jobs and welfare now, particularly the elderly, will in any case not live long enough to share in that recovery, however general it turns out to be.

So the currently popular argument, that we must reduce benefits now in order to achieve general prosperity later, is simply a piece of utilitarianism, which attempts to justify irreversible losses to a minority in order to achieve gains for the large majority. . . . But this denies the principle fundamental to liberalism based on equality, the principle that people must be treated with equal concern. It asks some people to accept lives of great poverty and despair, with no prospect of a useful future, just in order that the great bulk of the community may have a more ample measure of what they are forever denied. Perhaps people can be forced into this position. But they cannot accept it consistently with a full recognition of their independence, and their right to equal concern on the part of their government.
But suppose the case for [policy] . . . is put differently, by calling attention to the distinct social dangers of continuing or expanding past programs of redistribution. We might imagine two arguments of this sort. The first calls attention to the damage inflation does, not simply to the spending power, savings, and prospects of the majority, as individuals, but also to the public environment in which all citizens must live and in which all might take either pride or shame. As society becomes poorer, because production falls and wealth decays, it loses a variety of features we cherish. Its culture fails, its order declines, its system of criminal and civil justice becomes less accurate and less fair; in these and other ways it steadily recedes from our conception of a good society. The decline cannot be arrested by further taxation to support these public goods, for that will only shrink production further and accelerate the decline. According to this argument those who lose by programs designed to halt inflation and reinvigorate the economy are called upon to make a sacrifice, not just in order to benefit others privately, but out of a sense of loyalty to the public institutions of their own society.

The second argument is different because it calls attention to the interests of future generations. It asks us to suppose that if we are zealous for equality now, we will so depress the wealth of the community that future Americans will be even less well off than the very poor are now. Future Americans will have no more, perhaps, than the citizens of economically depressed third world countries in the present world. The second argument comes to this: the present poor are asked to sacrifice in favor of their fellow citizens now, in order to prevent a much greater injustice, to many more citizens, later.

Neither of these two arguments plainly violates the liberal’s axiomatic principle of equal concern and respect. Each can be offered to people who take pride in their equal worth and in the value of their convictions. But only in certain circumstances. Both arguments, though in different ways, appeal to the idea that each citizen is a member of a community, and that he can find, in the fate of that community, a reason for special burdens he can accept with honor rather than degradation. This is appropriate only when that community offers him, at a minimum, the opportunity to develop and lead a life he can regard as valuable both to himself and to it.

We must distinguish, that is, between passive and active membership in a community. Totalitarian regimes suppose that anyone who is present in their community, and so is amenable to its political force, is a member of the community from whom sacrifice might fairly be asked in the name of that
community’s greatness and future. Treating people as equals requires a more active conception of membership. If people are asked to sacrifice for their community, they must be offered some reason why the community which benefits from that sacrifice is their community; there must be some reason why, for example, the unemployed blacks of Detroit should take more interest in either the public virtue or the future generations of Michigan than they do in those of Mali.

We must ask in what circumstances someone with the proper sense of his own independence and equal worth can take pride in a community as being his community, and two conditions, at least, seem necessary to this. He can take pride in its present attractiveness—in the richness of its culture, the justice of its institutions, the imagination of its education—only if his life is one that in some way draws on and contributes to these public virtues. He can identify himself with the future of the community and accept present deprivation as sacrifice rather than tyranny, only if he has some power to help determine the shape of that future, and only if the promised prosperity will provide at least equal benefit to the smaller, more immediate communities for which he feels special responsibilities, for example, his family, his descendants, and, if the society is one that has made this important to him, his race.

These seem minimal conditions, but they are nevertheless exigent. Together they impose serious restraints on any policy that denies any group of citizens, however small or politically negligible, the equal resources that equal concern would otherwise grant them. Of course no feasible program can provide every citizen with a life valuable in his own eyes. But these constraints set a limit to what a government that respects equality may deliberately choose when other choices are available. People must not be condemned, unless this is unavoidable, to lives in which they are effectively denied any active part in the political, economic, and cultural life of the community. So if economic policy contemplates an increase in unemployment, it must also contemplate generous public provision for retraining or public employment. The children of the poor must not be stinted of education or otherwise locked into positions at the bottom of society. Otherwise their parents’ loyalty to them acts not as a bridge but as a bar to any identification with the future these parents are meant to cherish.

If this is right, then it suggests an order of priorities which any retrenchment in welfare programs should follow. Programs like food stamps, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, and those using federal funds to make
higher education available for the poor are the last programs that should be curtailed, or (what amounts to the same thing) remitted to the states through some “new federalism.” If “targeted” programs like these are thought to be too expensive, or too inefficient, then government must show how alternative plans or programs will restore the promise of participation in the future that these programs offered. In any case, cutbacks in the overall level of welfare provided to the poor should be accompanied by efforts to improve the social integration and political participation of blacks and other minorities who suffer most, in order to assure them a more prominent role in the community for which they sacrifice. Reductions in welfare should not be joined to any general retreat from affirmative action and other civil rights programs, or to any effort to repeal or resist improvements in the Voting Rights Act. That is why the economic and social programs so far proposed or enacted by the present administration seem so mean-spirited and cynical. Taken together, they would reduce rather than enlarge the political participation and social mobility of the class from which they demand the greatest sacrifice.

These observations offer only rough guidelines to the necessary conditions for asking people to sacrifice equal resources for the sake of their community. Different people will interpret these guidelines differently, and disagree about when they have been violated. But they may nevertheless serve as the beginning of an overdue development of liberal theory. During the long period of liberal ascendancy, from the New Deal through the 1960s, liberals felt confident that the immediate reduction of poverty was in every way good for the larger community. Social justice would, in Lyndon Johnson’s phrase, make the society great. Liberals thus avoided the question of what liberalism requires when prosperity is threatened rather than enhanced by justice. They offered no coherent and feasible account of what might be called economic rights for hard times: the floor beneath which people cannot be allowed to drop for the greater good.

If liberals remember the counsel of equal concern, they will construct such a theory now, by pointing to the minimal grounds on which people with self-respect can be expected to regard a community as their community, and to regard its future as in any sense their future. If government pushes people below the level at which they can help shape the community and draw value from it for their own lives, or if it holds out a bright future in which their own children are promised only second-class lives, then it forfeits the only premise on which its conduct might be justified.
We need not accept the gloomy predictions of the New Right economists that our future will be jeopardized if we try to provide everyone with the means to lead a life with choice and value, or if we continue to accept mobility as an absolute priority and try to provide appropriate higher education for everyone qualified. But if these gloomy predictions were sound, we should simply have to tailor our ambitions for the future accordingly. For society’s obligation runs first to its living citizens. If our government can provide an attractive future only through present injustice—only by forcing some citizens to sacrifice in the name of a community from which they are in every sense excluded—then the rest of us should disown that future, however attractive, because we should not regard it as our future either.