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1

The Basic Problem

CONTEMPORARY ANGLO-ANALYTIC POLITICAL theory now takes place on what Ronald Dworkin dubbed an “egalitarian plateau.”¹ Whilst thinkers of the past might have started from pre-sumptions of fundamental difference and inequality between (say) the genders, or people of different races, this is no longer the case. In political theory, we are all now presumed to be, in some fundamental sense, *basic equals*. Of course, what follows from this putative fact of basic equality remains enormously controversial: liberals, libertarians, conservatives, socialists, republicans, and others continue to disagree vigorously with each other, despite all being on the plateau. Likewise, specific questions as to who gets what, how much, and why, remain sites of protracted disagreement.² But the starting point—that all people are in some sense deserving of *prima facie* equal consideration—has become an axiom of our moral and political thinking.

But *why*? Why are we basic equals? The trouble is that as soon as one asks for an explanation of this foundational premise, it begins to look very shaky. After all, on any conceivable metric, human beings are notably *unequal*, and often to striking degrees. Such inequality ranges from the apparently trivial—differences in physical attributes such as height, weight, eyesight, hearing, capacity to grow hair, athletic ability, etc.—to things that moral and political philosophers (as well as ordinary people in ordinary life) typically take to be much less trivial: our intellectual capacities; the ability

to make and adhere to rational resolutions; emotional sensitivity; our capability of relating to others in appropriate ways—and so on. Whatever you pick, when you examine the human population at large, what you will discover is not equality, but *inequality*. This is true even just within the subset of “normal” adult humans, and becomes dramatically more so when we include those such as the profoundly mentally disabled, or very young children, or those suffering senile dementia, and so forth, recognition of whom greatly expands the range of inequalities that human beings exhibit. Furthermore, there is also the question of what exactly it is we are basic equals regarding. Philosophers in this area tend to talk of equal *worth*, but often without trying to specify what exactly that means. Other contenders include equal status, and also equal authority (i.e., as regards political participation and the legitimacy of how power is exercised by some over others).³ So why, given all these apparent difficulties and unclarities, are we nonetheless basic equals?

Over the past two decades, in large part thanks to the prompting of Jeremy Waldron, philosophers and political theorists have begun to focus on what, if anything, can explain and justify basic equality.⁴ So far, however, the results have not been good. Despite some valiant attempts (which I survey in the next chapter), the situation remains highly unsatisfactory. Richard Arneson puts the point well when he says that, as things stand, basic equality is neither acceptable nor rejectable.⁵ It is not *rejectable* because we appear to be, as a matter of fact, profoundly committed to the claim that we are all one another’s basic equals (no matter how much we disagree about what rightly follows from that). This is one of our deepest normative assumptions, and one we are not prepared to let go of lightly. But as things stand, there appear to be no good arguments for believing in basic equality. Hence—at least as philosophers and theorists concerned with establishing a normative claim and its grounds—basic equality does not appear to be *acceptable*, either.

The aim of this book is to try and show why basic equality *is* acceptable. To do so, however, it will also contend that we need to

approach the question rather differently to how it has mostly been handled so far. In particular, it maintains that we cannot hope to solve the issue by doing philosophy alone: by just thinking very hard, from our armchairs, of putative justifications against which we test our intuitions, and that we try to defend from counterexamples thought up by our cleverest opponents. Certainly, we are going to need some (in fact, a great deal of) philosophy to make progress. The tools of analytic distinction, rational probing of claims and their plausibility, and our reflective willingness and ability to endorse (or indeed, reject) what we find—all of which are the hallmarks of good philosophy—will be indispensable. But our philosophy will need to be what Bernard Williams described as *impure*: it must take on board and learn from other areas of human intellectual endeavour.⁶ In particular, we are going to need to look to insights available from research in psychology, what we know of our history, and how we go about practicing basic equality in our collective lives. Furthermore, when it comes to basic equality, we are also going to need to consider what we think philosophy itself is capable of achieving—what it is *for*—if we are to use it in the right kinds of ways.

What I mean by all of this will become clearer later, as the argument is built up over the chapters that follow. For now, I simply warn the reader that various reorientations and choices will be required in due course. We can, however, begin to make progress by specifying, somewhat more precisely, what it is we are looking for when it comes to basic equality.

Waldron has put the matter helpfully when he says that basic equality signals a refusal to draw the kinds of distinctions within the human set that we are typically comfortable drawing within the set of nonhuman animals, as well as between humans on the one hand and nonhuman animals on the other.⁷ Consider: amongst the nonhuman animals we do not assign equal value to all creatures. Domestic dogs and cats are typically accorded much higher status (at least in the West) than farmyard animals like cows and sheep, which in turn sit above creatures like pigeons, feral rats, and below them again, insects and arachnids, with bacteria probably

at the very bottom.⁸ What the thesis of basic equality denies is that any such gradations or distinctions of the sort that we are comfortable drawing between different kinds of animals might be made *within the human set*.⁹

It was, of course, not always like this—and indeed in many places in the world today, it is still not like this. Throughout most of human history, most people have been entirely comfortable with gradations and distinctions *within* the human set, in light of which significant differences of worth, and in turn of moral and political status, were widely believed to obtain. Gender remains an obvious and far-reaching example. For most of history, and in most societies, women have been variously subjugated by men, widely presumed to be “lesser” in some fundamental sense (with a great many political and social evils following from that). But race and ethnicity have clearly also been taken, and by no means in the recent history of the West alone, as signalling a demarcation of fundamental status within the human set, of the sort we are still comfortable and familiar drawing between animals, and that most of us want to draw between animals and humans, but now refuse to draw between humans alone. We deny that any such differentiations as posited by the patriarchal or racist societies of old do in fact exist, and we affirm that within the human set we are all equal. But on what grounds?

Furthermore, this is not a story of the crude unthinking masses postulating false differences of worth but which philosophers, via careful reflection, have consistently rejected via an affirmation of fundamental equality. On the contrary, many philosophers have taken it as evident that human beings are *not* basic equals. Plato and Aristotle, clearly enough, did not hold there to be basic equality within the human set. In *The Republic* we learn that hierarchical political rule is to reflect the fundamental differences in intellectual and spiritual capacities of the citizenry, whilst *Politics* teaches not only the inherently lesser status of women and “natural slaves,” but of barbarian and savage races as compared to educated male Greeks. Nor is this just a feature of ancient philosophy. Even

Enlightenment thinkers, who in their theoretical writings sometimes affirm something like basic equality in terms of inclusion and worth within political affairs, did not consistently extend such considerations throughout the human set. Thus Rousseau, for all his emphasis on the necessary equality of citizens in any legitimate political regime, was entirely comfortable excluding women from such considerations. Kant—often appealed to as the paragon of a philosopher who postulated the equal worth of all humans insofar as they were all possessed of the capacity for rational agency and thus obedience to the moral law, generating for them a special kind of dignity—was also capable of a level of racism that calls into serious doubt his holding any thoroughgoing commitment to basic equality within the entire human set.¹⁰ Even Hobbes, sometimes appealed to as an early proponent of basic equality due to his infamous pronouncement that in the state of nature all humans are equally vulnerable to violent death, turns out to have held a more complex position: that equality must be publicly affirmed as part of a pragmatic collective survival strategy, that is, as a way of securing peace precisely because humans are markedly *unequal* on all relevant metrics (including the ability to kill and to fend off would-be killers), and if not somehow contained, this inequality was likely to be a *casus belli*. Thus whilst Hobbes does not affirm basic *inequality* in the way some other notable philosophers have, it isn't straightforwardly the case that he offers arguments for their basic *equality*, either.¹¹

Indeed, in the history of Western political thought, the figure who seems to have done the most sustained thinking about the substance and grounding of basic equality is one whose writings many contemporary theorists now consider to be a dead end. As Waldron has shown, the body of work left to us by John Locke represents perhaps the most serious attempt to grapple with basic equality that we possess (although, as Waldron also notes, even Locke was unable to free himself from the pervasive sexism of his age¹²). Yet Locke worked from an explicitly theistic perspective: that we are basic equals because we are “all the Workmanship of

one Omnipotent, and infinitely wise Maker; All the servants of one Sovereign Master, sent into the World by his order and about his business.”¹³ This means that Locke’s thinking, for most contemporary political theorists, is deeply unsatisfactory, insofar as what most of us now want is a *secular* account of basic equality. Waldron has long been sceptical that a purely secular account can indeed be had, and in his more recent work he has proposed an explicitly Christian-inspired approach to the problem.¹⁴ But that won’t do for those of us who find that there are no good reasons to believe in any form of higher power, or supernatural maker, and hold out for an entirely nontheistic account of why we are, indeed, basic equals. Yet as we will see in the next chapter, all of the current secular attempts at a solution are unconvincing.

Further Complexities

Thus far I have been discussing basic equality as though it is merely a philosophical puzzle: how to account for this common intuition that we apparently all now have about us all being somehow on a level when it comes to our fundamental moral status. This, indeed, is how most of the literature on basic equality is currently framed. But it will not do. First, because the problem has crucial *historical* dimensions, to which we must also attend. Second, because the idea that we are all basic equals is in practice more *contested*, and is also far more *recent*, than one would guess from reading only the scholarly publications of academic political theorists and moral philosophers as produced in the last half century or so. Yet these facts matter.

We must be careful not to overestimate the extent to which those outside of the polite society that informs current academic discourse do endorse the basic equality claim.¹⁵ Certainly, it is now the case that explicitly racist or eugenicist work predicated on the inferiority of some kinds of people, and especially fascist or Nazi political thought positing (for example) biological hierarchies of race and inequality within the human set, are now beyond

the pale of civilised discourse, and in turn such views are not found in any reputable centre of learning. But that doesn't mean that such views don't continue to exist. At the extreme end of the spectrum there remain (for example) hardened racists and White supremacists, who use online forums, websites, and also public meetings and rallies, to disseminate an explicit denial of basic equality. For them, the "White race" ought to be accorded special status within the set of human animals, one that also involves exercising power over all the other races. Writing in the early 2020s, following the resurgence in openly ethnonationalist politics in America in particular, these people seem to be both more numerous, and less of a fringe political force, than at any previous time in the past half century. Basic equality is not yet universally accepted, even in the democratic West, and sadly it looks like it never really has been. Less extreme, but in some ways just as troubling, there are the more garden-variety forms of bigotry that one is apt to encounter if one leaves the confines of polite (and especially, academic) discourse. Think of the racist uncle one is forced to endure at Christmas dinner, with his views about Muslims, Blacks, and the "fact" that all major historical civilisational progress is due to the inherent superiority of European culture. Or the pub boor who foists his opinions about Asian communities on you unbidden at the bar. The truth is that beyond the confines of civilised discourse, there remain a disturbing number of people who are *not* fully signed up to basic equality.

Yet it is also significant that civilised discourse, for now at least, *has won*. It is a remarkable truth of recent history that basic equality has become a position which it is typically impermissible to publicly reject, at least outside of the purposefully artificial explorations of the philosophy seminar. In the democratic West at least, politicians of all stripes, if they wish to be taken seriously and to continue a career in politics, now at least pay lip service to the principle of basic equality. Take for example the following statement made by Boris Johnson, six years before he became UK prime minister:

No one can ignore the harshness of that competition, or the inequality that it inevitably accentuates; and I am afraid that violent economic centrifuge is operating on human beings who are already very far from equal in raw ability, if not spiritual worth.¹⁶

Johnson, a politician of the right, was trying to justify the vast inequalities in life chances that result from allowing extensive market competition to obtain. Notable, however, is that although Johnson is eminently comfortable with vast inequalities of *outcome* for individuals in a society, as allegedly stemming from their inequalities of talent (their “raw ability”), he nonetheless affirms a commitment to an underlying basic equality (their “spiritual worth”). Yet it was not always so. Prior to the Second World War, eugenicist ideas—i.e., that some people were of less worth than others, and that their traits should be bred out of the general population accordingly—flourished across the political spectrum, being by no means the preserve of the right. Members of the left-wing Fabian Society in Britain were for a time staunch supporters of eugenicist policies, and many self-identified liberals subscribed to eugenicist ideas that explicitly posited the lesser worth of some kinds of people compared to others (John Maynard Keynes, for example, was the first treasurer of the Cambridge Eugenics Education Society).¹⁷ By contrast, whilst today there certainly are racists, eugenicists, and just garden-variety bigots, they are either fringe political elements, or are required to hide their denial of basic equality when appearing in public. Whilst racist politics, and the depressing efficacy of appealing to racially charged divisions to obtain electoral success, have certainly not disappeared, what is remarkable today is that such activity is predominantly conducted through “dog-whistle” tactics, more or less under the guise of equal consideration for all, even if this is merely a cynical ploy.¹⁸ No serious politician with a shot at power anymore comes out and just affirms as a fact that (for example) Whites are superior to Blacks, or that men are superior to women, and that therefore such-and-such a policy must follow in turn. Even Donald Trump’s

race baiting of Mexicans prior to the 2016 presidential election focused on criminality and illegal immigration, stopping short of explicitly declaring Mexicans to be of less inherent worth than Americans (or rather, Republican-voting White Americans) *simply because* they were Mexican. In France, Marine Le Pen's ability to seriously challenge for the presidency has required her to first abandon the explicitly racist and Islamophobic pronouncements that her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, and his Front National party previously employed. Some politicians might continue to *think* things that deny basic equality, on lines of race, or gender, or sexuality, or some other metric of discrimination, and may attempt to signal to the like-minded amongst the electorate that they think these things. But it is understood that *saying* them is no longer acceptable.

This is a remarkable historical development. After all, throughout the vast majority of human history, the vast majority of people *have not* held basic equality to be true, and the vast majority of human societies *have not* been organised around even a minimal commitment to it, nor a concomitant understanding that all decent people agree on this premise (even if they disagree, sometimes fiercely, about what follows from it). This is evidently so in the history of the Western powers, mired as those are in the blood of colonial conquest and indigenous genocide, with wealth plundered high and wide from other civilisations, not least through the horrors of the Atlantic slave trade and an accompanying ideology of the inherent superiority of Whites over Blacks.¹⁹ But it is by no means unique to the West. The long-lasting and extensive Arab slave trade drew its legitimation in part from the denial of equal basic status to non-Muslims. For centuries, Japanese culture was predicated on the inherent ethnic superiority of the Japanese people, which served as legitimation for horrors periodically perpetrated on neighbouring Chinese and Korean populations, and later on captured Western soldiers in POW camps. The caste system in India is as explicit a denial of basic equality as could be imagined, and its legacy remains a feature of modern Indian society. China's

infamous one-child policy led to significant population imbalances between men and women due to the levels of infanticide and illegal abortion that tracked preexisting prejudices about the superiority of males over females. And for all of John Locke's attempts to derive an account of basic equality from Christian ideas, it is not hard to find in the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, ammunition for a view that God favours some kinds of human over others (not just the Nation of Israel, but heterosexual men in particular). Likewise, it ought to be remembered that racial segregationists in the American South were typically also staunch Christians. The Ku Klux Klan, after all, chose burning crosses as their preferred motif.

And once again, even just within the West (where basic equality has now become a widespread political axiom) what we have is not a simple history of vulgar prejudice being combatted by noble philosophers, but on the contrary, ready examples of intelligent and sincere philosophical partisans of the view that humans are *not* fundamentally equal. Take, as a case in point, the somewhat ghastly figure of Reverend Hastings Rashdall, whom Waldron has previously drawn our attention to. In the second edition of his *The Theory of Good and Evil: A Treatise on Moral Philosophy*, published in 1924, Rashdall could write words such as these:

I will now mention a case in which probably no one will hesitate. It is becoming tolerably obvious at the present day that all improvement in the social condition of the higher races of mankind postulates the exclusion of competition with the lower races. That means that, sooner or later, the lower Well-being—it may be ultimately the very existence of—countless Chinamen or negroes must be sacrificed that a higher life may be possible for a much smaller number of white men. It is impossible to defend the morality of such a policy upon the principle of equal consideration taken by itself and in the most obvious sense of the word.²⁰

What is remarkable about this statement is not just the—to us, now—deeply shocking claim that “countless Chinamen and

negroes” must be sacrificed to allow the “higher” White races to flourish, but Rashdall’s presumption that “no one will hesitate” in agreeing with his claim. In 1924, somebody could publish an explicitly racist denial of basic equality and *expect it to be uncontroversial*.

I take it that these facts—of wider history, of contemporary widespread acceptance of basic equality, of what is now politically beyond the pale when once it was entirely mainstream—are not likely to be incidental to any satisfactory account. What we are confronted with is not just a philosophical puzzle; it is also a historical one. How is it that only relatively recently in the history of Western societies, something which had previously been denied—or at the very least ignored, or gone unrecognised—and which all other human civilisations also seem to have denied throughout *their* histories, has nonetheless now come to be widely accepted as the only permissible outlook?

Most existing enquiries in this area proceed as though the historical issues can be treated in isolation from the philosophical question of why we are basic equals. This appears to be because most who have considered the matter seem to take it that there must be a fact of basic equality that stands *independent* of whatever particular historical contingencies happen to have obtained up until now. There are thus supposedly two separate questions: why we *are* basic equals, and why *people have come to believe* that we are basic equals. The philosopher’s job (they take it) is to work out the answer to the first in terms of an independent *justification* for why commitment to basic equality is warranted, whilst the historian or social scientist can deal with the second in terms of offering a causal *explanation* of how and why ordinary people might have come to hold such a belief. There is thus a neat division of labour appropriate in this area. By contrast, I reject this perspective and this putative division of labour. I do so for the following reasons.

First, I take it that the persistent failure of philosophers to establish any fact of the matter about basic equality that is simply “there,” waiting to be discovered through the power of reason and reflection alone, is strongly indicative that such an endeavour is a

hiding to nothing. By this point, too many highly intelligent thinkers have tried and failed. This is a clue that the strategy isn't working, and won't be made to work by some clever philosopher coming along with a yet cleverer theory. If basic equality could be sorted out by standard philosophical methods of pure argument and analysis, I suspect that it already would have been. Now it might be replied that working out answers to such questions is very difficult, and we just need more time: after all, it took human beings millennia to discover the Pythagorean theorems about triangles, although once they had been established, they could then be taught to intelligent ten-year-olds. Might basic equality not be like that? I doubt it, however, because I doubt very much that understanding basic equality requires grasping some fact or truth of the matter that is simply there, independent of us and of the history which led us to become committed to it—which brings me to my second point.

Namely, I doubt very much that it is simply a coincidence that academic philosophers and political theorists, on the one hand, and the general mass of ordinary peoples within Western societies, on the other, just so happened, at around the same time, in the same societies, to simultaneously converge on a widespread belief in basic equality. On the contrary, I suspect that this convergence is indicative of the very nature of the commitment we are trying to make sense of. In turn, I find it even less likely that ordinary people converged on some rough version of this idea (which is also an ideal) *because* the philosophers were doing so.²¹ Any attribution of decisive causal efficacy on behalf of academic thinkers here would be the height of delusion. (And indeed, it definitely cannot be true: as Waldron has pointed out, until he started raising the question in a persistent manner about twenty years ago, few had interrogated the reasons for us all being on Dworkin's plateau, and those who had done so confessed themselves deeply puzzled.) Although many philosophers proceed as though this matter is simply irrelevant—that they are interested in discovering the truth of the matter, and whether or not ordinary people happen to believe

in that truth is beside the point—I take it that the shift onto the egalitarian plateau in the West, in roughly the period since the Second World War, by academic philosophers and theorists at the same time as much of the general population, is a sign that all are moving in response to changes that have taken place in wider society. In this case, I suspect, the changes in philosophy are largely causally downstream of changes in social reality. And so, if we want to understand what our commitment to basic equality now consists in, we had better take seriously its history. In this area, doing “pure” philosophy will not give us what we need.

It might be replied that what I have just said is all well and good, but it doesn’t really affect the heart of the matter, for what philosophers ultimately seek to know is not how particular beliefs came about, but whether our normative commitment to basic equality can be *justified*—and isn’t that simply a separate question from explaining whether and how various people did (or did not) come to believe in it at a particular point in time? My position here, however, is that these questions are in fact not separable: that in order to be able to say whether or not commitment to basic equality is normatively justified *requires* taking account of the explanation of how the commitment arose and became widespread.²² Hence (I want to argue) it is hopeless in this case to try and do normative philosophy in isolation from the history of the phenomenon under examination. Seeing why this is so will, however, take a little time, and indeed constitutes the first step in the positive account put forward in this book. I thus beg the reader’s patience; a fuller answer on these points is coming, beginning in chapter 3.

For reasons similar to those just noted (and which are again expanded on below), I treat it as a serious mark against any attempt to account for basic equality if what we are given is a hyper-intellectualist theory that is only accessible to those with extensive technical philosophical training, and which nobody could ever have thought of, let alone understood, unless they were already a professional philosopher with the benefit of many years of advanced study. Whatever basic equality consists in, it has to be

something that *ordinary people* can have gotten a grasp on, and indeed something that moved not just ordinary people, but all of those professional political theorists who found themselves on Dworkin's egalitarian plateau by the early 1980s, despite most of them having nothing to say about *why* they believed all acceptable political theory had indeed to start from *there*. Given that for much of Western intellectual history basic *inequality* has been the default position, the speed and extent to which basic equality became the dominant outlook is something that itself needs to be acknowledged, but which cannot be explained through recourse to any theory so complex that only a handful of elite academic thinkers can even understand what it says.²³

This is not to say that ordinary people, the vast majority of whom go about their daily lives without any advanced philosophical (or indeed any other intellectual) training, will themselves all need to be able to understand a particular philosophical account in order for that account to be correct. If that were the bar to be cleared, then no philosophy would ever clear it, and it would certainly be to demand far too much. But the point I am making is different: it is that any explanation offered needs to be plausible as *an explanation* (which is not the same as saying that the explanation itself must be universally intelligible). The explanation for why people in the West now widely subscribe to a belief in basic equality cannot be that they are consciously committed to complex philosophical theorems which they have never encountered, and probably couldn't understand even if they did encounter them, lacking as they do the necessary years of advanced intellectual training required to do so. But it does not follow from this that a successful philosophical account of basic equality must *itself* be intelligible to those same people whose beliefs and attitudes it is trying to explain. It may turn out to be intelligible only to those who have the benefit of the advanced training, even if it posits as part of its explanation only materials that are plausibly available to those whose beliefs and values it is trying to explain. And that is fine, because the two things may be entirely distinct. (To draw a

rough analogy with science: the biologist explaining how breathing gets oxygen into red blood cells had better come up with a robust scientific account that explains why and how all healthy humans do indeed get oxygen into their red blood cells. But it clearly doesn't follow that all healthy humans—especially those lacking biological training—should be able to follow in full the technicalities of the account the biologist puts forwards *in order* for the account to be considered correct.)

What we are looking for, then, is a way to explain not just a philosophical puzzle—in virtue of what are we basic equals?—but what is also a dramatic historical development: how is it that in Western societies, in a period of less than a century, we went from basic equality being one view in competition with others, to being the only game in town? Both of these elements, I argue, are going to be important if we want to gain a proper understanding of the phenomenon in question. History matters, I will here be maintaining, because basic equality is a value that has arisen—and only makes sense—in a specific historical context. But philosophy matters, because what we are trying to explain and reflectively endorse is indeed a normative commitment, and in order to understand what that commitment consists in, we need normative analysis and critique—and that requires doing philosophy. My point, however, is that we need both *together*. I am not a historian, so I will not attempt to offer a detailed history of the dramatic rise of basic equality in Western societies in this book. But I will try to show, and make good on, the reasons why our philosophical analysis had better pay attention to the relevant history at key points.

Do We Even Need an Answer?

Before proceeding further, however, we might ask whether we even need an answer at all. Does it *matter* if we can't account for basic equality, and should the current lack of any satisfactory account bother us? After all, I've already referred to basic equality as, precisely, an *axiom*—and the point about axioms is that they do

not need to be (indeed, standardly cannot be) proven. Can we not just say that basic equality is *simply what we believe*—a sort of normative ground zero—and leave it at that?²⁴

There is something important in this line of response (and I return to it later in the book). For indeed there are times and places when it is eminently appropriate. Most obviously, if one is confronted by (say) a neo-Nazi who is affirming the subhuman status of Jews, then a straightforward affirmation of the principle of basic equality may well be the correct response, whereas getting drawn into a “debate” about what makes us all basic equals is likely to be a serious strategic error, where it would be foolish to think that one is entering into a genuine exchange of ideas undertaken in good faith.

There is also the entirely correct point that whilst it may be very hard to come up with an account of why we are all basic equals, it is not as though the opponent of basic equality holds better cards—or at least, not under the guises that basic *inequality* usually gets affirmed. After all, whilst it is certainly the case that human beings appear markedly unequal on any conceivable metric whatsoever, it is also evident that those inequalities do not track the usual candidates that are claimed for making divisions within the human set. The variation between the races and genders (and so on) are as dramatic as the variations within them. It is simply not the case that (for example) *all* Whites are superior as regards to X than *all* Blacks, or that *all* women are inferior to *all* men when it comes to Y. Quite the contrary, and far from it. On any conceivable metric, some individual member of some grouping within the human set will be in possession of more (or less) of whatever it is we might choose to consider, than some individual member of some other group. Whilst we are all unequal in varying ways, and to varying degrees, that inequality is randomly distributed amongst and between different groups of human beings and does not track other identifiable characteristics in any reliable or predictable form. Can we not therefore simply leave the matter there, and go on affirming basic equality as an axiom in light of the fact that there are no good arguments for basic *inequality*?

Again, this may sometimes be an entirely appropriate response, in particular when we are occupied with the business of trying to regulate and improve the social world and where pausing to ask foundational philosophical questions is liable to be unhelpful. But this will not do from the perspective of reflective enquiry.²⁵ After all, and as indicated above, it seems that we have a commitment to basic equality that is a great deal more substantive than it simply being the thing we have plumbed for in the absence of any good argument for the opposite. Our belief in the basic-ness of basic equality both feels and functions like a lot more than just an arbitrary decision, or brute preference. Even more importantly, insofar as we are engaged in reflective enquiry, we want to know *why* we believe and value certain things, and in turn, whether those things are *correct*, and whether we ought in the light of critical reflection to go on endorsing them or not. The question of why we are basic equals has now been raised, and it cannot be un-asked. Critical reflection on its status has begun, and such critical reflection, as Max Weber put it, is not a taxicab one can hail at will. We are going to have to see where it takes us.²⁶

Furthermore, there is an important point here about what we want to say in the light of *challenges* to the idea of basic equality. As mentioned above, rejection of basic equality, even within the recent West, never entirely went away, and worryingly it appears as though it may be once more on the rise. Globally speaking, given the fact that for most of human history it is basic *inequality* that has been the default, we ought to think carefully about what we want to say in defence of what appears to be a foundational aspect of our present normative outlook. After all, there is no good reason to think that our outlook is guaranteed to survive simply because it now exists. (One thing that history teaches us is that moral outlooks can and do change—and sometimes die.) Thus, whereas in mathematics it may be perfectly acceptable to say “that’s just an axiom: it grounds the proof but it cannot itself be proven,” basic equality is not like that. As reflective agents, we need *reasons* to adhere to some normative principles rather than others, at least if we are to continue to endorse them once

reflection has begun, and in opposition to those who deny what we hold to be an important normative commitment.

However, we should also not demand or expect too much of our reasons and our reflection. When offering a defence of basic equality, it is not necessary that we set the bar so high that the only acceptable account is one that could convince a thoroughgoing moral sceptic, or a full-blooded opponent of basic equality, to change their mind.²⁷ There are some people who are just never going to be convinced by what we say, either because they reject our values so thoroughly that there is nothing for us, using our values, to get a grip on, or because they deny the validity of any values at all (consider the perhaps fanciful spectre of the nihilist who rejects *all* claims of normativity, whatsoever). What we should look for here is something less, but nonetheless entirely adequate: what we can say, to each other, about why we believe in the value of basic equality, and why we are right to uphold this in the face of opposition that we may encounter (which is not necessarily the same thing as *convincing* those opponents that we may encounter), and hence why we should continue to strive for a world in which no fundamental divisions within the human set are viewed as legitimate. What we need here is not an argument so powerful that it can compel anybody and everybody—even the committed racist, or the thoroughgoing moral sceptic—to accept the truth of basic equality. What we need is an account that we, who *are* already within a particular worldview that includes basic equality, find compelling in the right kind of ways, and which provides us with reasons for continuing to endorse it following serious reflection.

Now that the question of why we should believe in basic equality has been raised, we need to say something substantive in reply. We cannot—either as philosophers seeking the best account, nor as moral agents navigating a contested ethical and political landscape—simply assert it as an axiom that requires no further comment (even if, for practical political purposes, or at other levels of theoretical reflection, we do indeed, and quite correctly, sometimes treat it that way). The strategy adopted in what follows, in

light of all this, is an attempted reorientation of how to think about both the problem and its solution. As will be seen in the next chapter, the existing approaches to the question of basic equality treat things as though there is some independent fact of the matter about why we *are* basic equals, and hence view basic egalitarianism—the disposition to treat each other *as* equals—as both explanatorily and conceptually downstream of that putatively independent fact. The problem (as we shall see) is that there just appear to be no good reasons for establishing any such putatively independent, and prior (we might say, grounding) fact of basic equality. Basic egalitarianism thus looks imperilled: a commitment without a foundation. But what if we approach the matter, so to speak, the other way around? That is the strategy adopted in what follows. Let us ask instead: what is this disposition to treat each other as basic equals, that is, to adopt a commitment to basic *egalitarianism*? Where did this disposition come from, and how does it work? Once we have a clear answer to the problem posed in this manner, I suggest, we will then be in a position to understand what is going on when we think of each other *as* basic equals. Hence whereas the standard approaches treat the egalitarian disposition as a principle made concrete, I treat the principle as the disposition made abstract. Where others defend the egalitarian disposition by arguing for the basic equality principle, I argue for accepting the basic equality principle by presenting what has come to be known as a vindicatory genealogy of the disposition. In proceeding this way, we can in turn entirely avoid the need to offer some sort of foundation for the commitment to basic equality (which is a significant advantage, given that no such foundation appears to exist). Crucially, however, we can do this without giving up on the normative importance that the commitment to basic equality now genuinely has for us. Getting to the point where this all makes sense will, however, take some time, requiring various stages of reorientation. We begin, therefore, by first considering the most promising attempts to account for the basis of basic equality that have thus far been suggested, but none of which are adequate to the task.

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