

Michael Walzer In Defense of Equality 1973

What are his politics?

Modern liberal

Democratic socialist

Social democrat

Walzer's Critique of the "Conservative Position"

The conservative position that he criticizes is the argument that the present distribution of wealth and power reflects a natural inequality of talent

At the very center of conservative thought lies this idea: that the present division of wealth and power corresponds to some deeper reality of human life (first sentence of essay)

Basically an argument that the distribution is natural, hence just.

Indeed, that is the standard defense of inequality

That the inequality of benefits reflects some underlying natural inequality of talent, or effort, or virtue

Other defenses of inequality?

If the process is fair the results are fair. If the inequality results from a fair(competitive) process than it is fair. It is just.

Basically, that is the argument made by Robert Nozick

But what is Walzer's position?

Does he argue that we really are all equal in talent?

Not exactly He seems to admit that talents, like income, are distributed on a bell shaped curve, with most of us in the middle

So then, doesn't the inequality of income merely reflect the inequality of talent? What's the problem?

Walzer contends that inequality of wealth does reflect inequality of talent
But what particular talent? That is the question.

Consider the range and variety of human capacities: intelligence, physical strength, agility and grace, artistic creativity, mechanical skill, leadership, endurance, memory, psychological insight, capacity for hard work, even moral strength, sensitivity and the ability to express compassion
p 657 1st ed , 719 2nd ed

Since there is such a variety of talent, there must be a variety of curves
Aren't most of average at many things, excellent at some things, below average at other things.

Okay, but what underlying talent is reflected in the distribution of wealth?
Walzer argues that it is the talent of making money

But wait, isn't this just a reflection of other talents? Or is it?
Give it some thought? If Jack is more talented at making money than Joe, doesn't that reflect that fact that Jack is just a more talented person than Joe. He is smarter, more creative, has better interpersonal skills, etc.
Before you dismiss Walzer's argument, ask yourself the following question.
After receiving a less than excellent grade, have you ever said "I really understand the material, I'm just not good at taking tests"
As a "recovering C student" I have some experience with this.

What other factors come into play?

Inheritance, luck, various social, economic and cultural factors like race, ethnicity, gender and social class

Walzer argues that , of course those factors must influence the development of talent.

Notice that this is a key difference between modern liberals and conservatives.

Conservatives, argue that most of us get what we deserve, what we have earned. If you have more money than me it is probably because you have

earned it and deserve it. Our economic circumstances generally reflect our ability, and effort.

Modern liberals and socialists would argue that our wealth and income is largely determined by social-economic factors beyond our control.

Anyway. Walzer is not against those who are good at making money, having more money

Just like people who are good at making candy should have lots of candy

Walzer's Position On Equality/Inequality

Walzer then takes the argument in another direction Even if the people with the most money really are the ones with the most skill, merit, etc. just what does that entitle them to ?

To what benefits are those with the most money entitled?

Walzer seems to be saying that those with more money are entitled to more luxuries, but not to more necessities.

So being wealthy entitles me to a bigger, and nicer house, several cars, perhaps a boat, opportunities for world travel, an extensive art collection, but not to better health care, education or police protection.

Nor should my wealth entitle me to more political power, or more civil liberty. Economic inequality should not lead to political inequality.

So Walzer is an egalitarian but not an absolute egalitarian.

In his vision of a just society there would be some inequality of wealth and income. But it would be an inequality of luxuries. Necessities would be distributed equally

How do we determine what is a luxury and what is a necessity?

Walzer defines luxuries as those *goods and services beyond what is necessary for life itself* p 663 1st ed p724 2nd ed

Thus, necessities are those goods and services necessary for life itself.
What would those include? Education? Healthcare? Rights and liberties?

What would such a society look like?

Would it be more just than our current society?

If so, how could it be achieved.?

Would there be majority support for this vision of social democracy?

What specific policies might Walzer support?

But how would Nozick, and other libertarians/classic liberals and conservatives respond to Walzer's egalitarian argument?

I think that their objection would be that the cost of such an egalitarian society would be a loss of liberty.

How so? Do you agree?

Nozick might see these egalitarian policies as violating the rights of individuals by forcing them to help others. (higher taxes, etc)

What do you think?

For Nozick liberty and equality are contradictory values.

Maximizing one minimizes the other.

But for Walzer there is no such contradiction

Liberty and equality(properly understood) are complimentary values

Quoting Walzer at length

It is worth noting that equality as I have described it does not stand alone but is closely related to the idea of liberty

The right reason for distributing, love, belief and political power is the freely given consent of lovers, believers and citizens

What is necessary is that everybody be free to say yes or no.

Without liberty there could be no rightful distribution at all

On the other hand, we are not free, not politically free at least, if his yes, because of his birthplace or fortune counts seventeen times more heavily than my no

..liberty and equality are the two chief virtues of social institutions, and they stand best when they stand together.

p 667 1st ed p 727 2nd ed