

Sypnowich, Christine. *Equality Renewed: Justice, Flourishing and the Egalitarian Ideal*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2017. Pp. 252. \$145.00 (cloth).

According to Christine Sypnowich, theorising about equality is in a bad way. The ideal of equality has come under sustained attack from theorists of ‘difference’, who focus on claims arising from the particularities of identity and culture, and view equality as a homogenising doctrine based upon a false universalism. Defenders of equality, meanwhile, have become “mired in odd debates and concerns” (221) about welfare for surfers, expensive tastes, and the precise distinction between choice and luck. To make matters worse, liberal political theory is dominated by neutralism, an “aberrant” view that is “at odds with the tradition of conceiving social justice with reference to ideas of wellbeing, the public good, and community that are so central to the ideal of equality and the hope of its realisation” (212). These various developments all conspire to leave equality beleaguered. The key to its renewal, Sypnowich argues, is a return to a focus on human flourishing or wellbeing, recasting egalitarianism in an unapologetically perfectionist vein. “It is the task of the egalitarian state to enable citizens to live worthwhile lives” (7). Sypnowich thus endeavours to defend flourishing as the proper metric of equality, responding to various objections to perfectionism along the way, and to show that this conception of equality both enables a persuasive response to theorists of difference and illuminates contemporary debates about topics such as responsibility, multiculturalism, the public good, and global justice.

As should be clear, *Equality Renewed* covers a lot of ground. Sypnowich touches on a huge range of subjects and thinkers, including drawing upon unusual sources such as William Morris (133-7) (who “may seem a surprising

choice” [212]) and commenting upon on unusual topics such as the role of the aesthetic within egalitarianism (168-70). This wide scope is both a strength and weakness. It means that the argument sometimes feels rather unfocused, and makes some of the key moves rather quick. As I will note below, there are tensions in Sypnowich’s view of equal flourishing that are never adequately resolved. Further, advocates of the various views that come under fire will undoubtedly have much to say in response. But the broad scope also means that the book offers a helpful overview of many central debates in contemporary political philosophy, and Sypnowich charts an interesting and perceptive course through the terrain.

After a helpful introduction, Part I of *Equality Renewed* tackles the challenges to equality posed by issues of difference. Chapter 1 argues that equality of flourishing provides the best response to difference, because it incorporates a concern for the way that differences might affect wellbeing into a universalist conception of equality. We should “focus on the interests that accrue from different identities and the extent to which they point to inequalities that require political redress” (31), rather than assuming all differences to be normatively salient or failing to address real inequalities by indiscriminately respecting difference or seeking cultural parity. Chapters 2 and 3 illustrate this argument through discussions of race and gender respectively. On race, Sypnowich argues that colour-consciousness can lead theorists to lose sight of the egalitarian ideal. We might need some provisional colour-consciousness, so as to recognise the unjust effects of racial difference, but within a theory that emphasises “wider membership” as “the basis for a cross-identity appeal to justice and equality” (46). On gender, Sypnowich argues that a focus on flourishing allows us to sidestep intractable questions regarding how best to conceive of gender.

“Gender per se presents no political imperatives” (65), but we must eliminate all obstacles to equality posed by gender and sex.

In Part II Sypnowich critiques two trends in liberal political theory that have emerged in response to difference: neutralism and multiculturalism. Chapter 4 critiques the “dubious concept of neutrality” (83), arguing that we must “take the leap and commit to a conception of human flourishing” (84). But a more modest ideal of impartiality plays a role within that conception: we want to impartially promote the good of all. Indeed, critiques of impartiality and neutrality gain their normative force from impartiality itself. It is impartiality that gives us reason to attend to the claims of disadvantaged groups highlighted by those critiques (85). Further, impartiality can be sensitive to difference in its application, when this is required in order to properly attend to the flourishing of all. Chapter 5 argues that the major problem with liberal multiculturalism is its failure to engage in a normative assessment of culture. Cultural identity matters due to being part of wellbeing. This can justify culturally-sensitive policies if a valuable cultural identity—one “meeting tests of equality and autonomy (104)—is a source of inequality (97-99). But it can also justify reforms of cultures, when they contain elements incompatible with flourishing (99). Further, equality highlights the foundational importance of a common (though diverse) culture, in which we all participate and through which we access the goods required to live well (101-104). We should continue to promote that common culture, even while remaining sensitive to cultural diversity if and when it is related to unequal flourishing.

The overall message of Parts I and II of *Equality Renewed* is that a substantive conception of equal flourishing can better handle issues of difference than other accounts. Taking on board the insights of difference-based argu-

ments can strengthen, rather than undermine, equality, as we “take account of the particular in order to impartially apply a universal standard of equality” (88). The plausibility of this argument crucially depends on Sypnowich’s conception of equal flourishing. We get various hints of this in Chapters 1-5. We learn that wellbeing includes enjoyment of things of objective value (93) but is not wholly objective (32), that Sypnowich endorses a pluralistic vision of the good (16, 64) that will not dictate a single way of life to all (84), and that “autonomy, self-determination, and freedom from coercion” (84) are crucial to flourishing. These scattered comments leave many questions unanswered, however. For example, we are told that a good life involves freedom from coercion and public institutions must permit us to “pursue worthwhile commitments and values” (85). But what about worthless or irrational pursuits, such as buying lottery tickets or taking drugs (84)? May the state interfere with these choices, in order to promote wellbeing, or should we be free from coercion even in these cases? The answer to this will depend on Sypnowich’s conception of autonomy, which will determine whether there is value in being free to pursue disvaluable options. Sypnowich’s view of autonomy will also determine which cultures are deemed anti-flourishing, and what kinds of interferences with those cultures is permissible. But this is not clear at this stage of the book. For this reader, at least, it seemed unfortunate to get halfway through the book without a detailed presentation of the central conceptions on which the plausibility of the arguments made thus far crucially depend. While this in no way leaves these early chapters without merit, it does rather obscure some of the key claims regarding the dispute between egalitarians and theorists of difference.

Sypnowich develops her account of equality and flourishing in Part III. First, in Chapter 6, she argues that a focus on flourishing provides responses to three prominent challenges to material equality: the levelling down objection, the role of talent, and the place of partiality. Material inequality usually causes various kinds of wellbeing inequalities, giving many reasons to pursue material equality for the sake of equal flourishing (116-121). The achievements of the talented benefit everyone, by providing discoveries, ideas, and arts that enhance culture and improve our standard of living (“a genuine case of ‘trickle down’” [121]), giving us reason to promote the exercise of talent. But we should sever talent from economic reward and should not license incentives (121-122). Personal partiality should be permitted, but against a background commitment to equality and a recognition that our individual wellbeing depends upon membership in an egalitarian community (122-127).

Chapter 7 focuses more squarely on equal flourishing itself. We should adopt flourishing as the metric of equality because we care about the actual achievement of wellbeing—something that welfarist, resourcist, and capabilities-based approaches fail to capture (138-140). Flourishing has three constitutive elements: the ability to choose how to live (autonomy), objectively worthwhile pursuits, and personal contentment (140-141). A flourishing life involves freely pursuing goods that are both objectively valuable and create subjective welfare. This account of flourishing enables judgments concerning individuals’ levels of wellbeing, but not precise measurements, so strict equality of flourishing is ruled out (143). Nonetheless, equality should remain the aim. More specifically, we should seek to bring everyone up to an ever-rising threshold of flourishing (144-146). In this process, we should be particularly attentive to the environmental factors that are at the root of many wellbeing deficits (143). A

poor cultural environment can both limit the availability of objectively valuable options and undermine autonomy. Government intervention is often required in order to create the conditions for flourishing, and thus various perfectionist policies are justified by equality.

A common objection to perfectionism is that it is illiberal; as I noted above, a focus on flourishing might justify forcing people to refrain from worthless pursuits – or even forcing them to engage in worthwhile pursuits. Sypnowich tackles this problem in Chapter 8, which explores the place of autonomy within flourishing. She argues that coercion is at odds with flourishing, due to violating autonomy (156-158). But autonomy requires a genuine exercise of self-determination. Our desires, tastes, and needs are shaped by our social context, and choice has value when we are in a position to make good choices (158-159). Perfectionist policies that promote valuable options and create the conditions for genuine choice thus promote autonomy itself. The question of precisely what goods to promote and when “belongs properly to the domain of democratic debate” (170). Indeed, Sypnowich places great emphasis on democratic control of our social and economic lives, as opposed to allowing our social context to be defined by the market. She is highly critical of the market’s deleterious effects on flourishing (159-161, 183-184).

Public institutions’ role in fostering a culture of flourishing is further expounded in Chapter 9, where Sypnowich seeks to reclaim the concept of the public good as an egalitarian idea (181-186). Attending to the public good also alerts us to the way that many objective goods extend across borders, and to the existence of global public goods that benefit all peoples (186-192). Chapter 10 explores the question of global justice in more detail. Sypnowich argues that we have cosmopolitan duties to promote flourishing worldwide, but that

this will include facilitating cultural variation (as long as local cultures pose a genuine framework for wellbeing) and local responsibility-taking, since “a culture of self-determining citizenship” (196) is crucial for flourishing.

Chapters 6-10 of *Equality Renewed* thus present a powerful case for equality of flourishing. But several important details of the account remain rather underdeveloped or unclear. One major question concerns the way the three elements of flourishing—autonomy, objectively worthwhile pursuits, and personal contentment—interact. Are each of these elements necessary conditions that each pursuit, project, or activity must meet in order to contribute to flourishing? Or are they simply contributing factors? Sypnowich writes that freely chosen objectively worthwhile pursuits are “inadequate sources of wellbeing” if one “derives no pleasure or fulfilment from them” (140). But it is not clear whether this means that such pursuits do not contribute to wellbeing at all, or just that their contribution is lower than it would otherwise be. It is also unclear whether *every* activity one engages in needs to be autonomous, worthwhile, and contented, or whether flourishing can come from different activities displaying different combinations of these features. Further, we face the challenge of how to make judgments in cases where these features conflict, such as when an individual would be more contented with a less worthwhile pursuit, without the account becoming objectionably prescriptive concerning the nature of a flourishing life. The answers to these sorts of questions will significantly shape the ultimate implications of Sypnowich’s view, and its attractiveness to both liberals and theorists of difference.

Such questions are particularly important when we consider the autonomy component. Early in the chapter on autonomy, Sypnowich suggests that autonomous choice is a necessary condition for a pursuit to contribute to

flourishing, such that coercion and manipulation are ruled out (157-8). We cannot restrict autonomy with regard to some options for the sake of increasing overall flourishing (165). Sypnowich's further comments on the nature of autonomy cast doubt on whether the prohibition on coercion and manipulation is sustainable, however. "Living autonomously is an elusive idea" because it involves "self-determination" (158) and "self-creation" (159), not mere choice. Choice is valuable *when* we are in a position to make good choices about how to live, and thus to achieve self-realisation. Further, bad choices can actually *diminish* self-realisation, and the opportunity to choose the bad itself lacks value (159). The implication Sypnowich draws from all this, as we have seen, is that society should tackle the context in which choices are made, in order to facilitate genuine autonomy. She is clear that this involves incentives and social institutions that promote the valuable, but continues to suggest that concern for autonomy rules out coercion (164). It is not clear why this is that case, however. If choosing the bad diminishes wellbeing and the opportunity to choose the bad lacks autonomy-based value, then there seems to be no objection to the state coercively removing bad options and protecting good options. Indeed, Sypnowich suggests that autonomy *means* a respect for various sorts of value (220), which implies that one can only be autonomous if one has certain substantive commitments. If so, even forcing people to develop these commitments might well not violate autonomy.

Sypnowich's response to the worry that perfectionist theories cannot be truly liberal is to insist that autonomous choice is a constituent of flourishing. Yet her substantive conception of autonomy does not seem to rule out—and might even encourage—the kinds of interferences with individual choices that liberals fear. Sypnowich could avoid this objection by holding that the availa-

bility even of bad options contributes to autonomy. This move threatens to undermine her argument for extensive non-coercive ‘moral environmentalism’, however, since all such state interferences would now involve restrictions on autonomy.

This discussion points toward a more general question regarding the way in which the subjectivist and objectivist elements of Sypnowich’s account of flourishing relate to one another. This is not always clear. For example, when Sypnowich argues that “individual wellbeing depends on justice” (128), and thus on equality, it sometimes seems that this is due to the anxieties created (even for the rich) by living in unjust conditions (128). But at other times it seems that this is a straightforwardly objective claim, such that even those who lack such anxieties are nonetheless “living a lesser life” (126). Similar comments apply to Sypnowich’s insistence that non-contribution to society is itself a “shortfall in flourishing” (149). Consider too her discussion of the public good. Sypnowich lists various public goods that seem to qualify as such due to their objective value: “tolerance, aesthetic appreciation, civility” (182), support for social life, and a wide variety of publicly-provided goods. But she also mentions “common commitment on value” (183), “public conception of the good” (185) and common understanding of the value of particular goods (193). It is not clear what role these ideas are playing. At times it seems that something cannot be part of the public good unless there is some kind of shared endorsement of its value. But the thrust of the account suggests otherwise. It is the objective value of goods provided by the community that ultimately seems to define their place within the public good; the common commitment should track the objective value.

It is notable that in each of these cases Sypnowich ultimately seems to build further substantive content into her conception of flourishing. Flourishing now requires actively participating in an egalitarian society, seeing oneself as a full participant with duties of mutual aid (150), and recognising the value of a multitude of public goods. While she insists that her account makes room for self-determination and requires personal contentment, the objective repeatedly seems to take precedence over the subjective, in ways that potentially open the door for paternalistic and liberty-limiting forms of government intervention aimed at creating the conditions for citizens to live worthwhile lives.

My critical discussion thus far has focused on Sypnowich's conception of flourishing. I will finish with a comment regarding her account of equality. One might think that a focus on all individuals developing their capacities and achieving high levels of functioning is in tension with equality. After all, won't those with greater talents end up with higher levels of flourishing? Or, alternatively, won't a focus on equalisation mean the talented are held back from realising their potential? Sypnowich is aware of these problems, but her responses are not entirely convincing. She emphasises that the talented provide benefits to all (121-122). We should thus encourage people to develop their talents, even while aiming for equality of wellbeing by breaking the connection between talent and economic reward. However, it is surely still likely that some will end up with higher levels of wellbeing than others, if all fulfil their potential. It seems Sypnowich is happy to accept this inequality for the sake of greater flourishing overall. This is confirmed later, when Sypnowich endorses a 'threshold approach', according to which we should focus on enabling everyone to reach a (high) threshold level of flourishing, while accepting inequality above the threshold (144-145). This does not make the view sufficientarian,

since Sypnowich advocates raising the threshold over time, thus reducing the gap between the less and more advantaged. This move seems to reintroduce the problems of talent, however. Achieving equality at a high level of flourishing might well have to involve holding the talented back, while the promotion of excellence will likely create inequalities. Perhaps Sypnowich would be happy as long as society was arranged in a way that enabled all citizens to achieve high levels of wellbeing, even if inequalities remained. But in that case it is not really clear that her view is aiming for equality of flourishing—at least not in the way that other views aim for equality of welfare or resources—contra her consistent claim that “equal human wellbeing ... is properly our aim” (122).

I have raised various questions and concerns regarding Sypnowich’s account of equal flourishing. But none of this should detract from the achievement of the book in developing this distinctive position, and relating it to so many crucial debates within political theory. *Equality Renewed* will be of interest to a wide audience—including theorists who engage with questions of equality, difference, neutrality, and perfectionism—and will be a valuable resource for future debates concerning the role that the state should play in facilitating flourishing.

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