

## Social Equality with Jessica Flanigan

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**Christiane Wisehart, host and producer:** I'm Christiane Wisehart, and this is Examining Ethics, brought to you by The Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

**[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Gin Boheme]**

**Christiane:** Social or relational egalitarians believe that humans should treat one another as equals. They'll often point to democracy as the most realistic means of achieving their political goals in an egalitarian way. And this makes sense in theory, right? Everyone gets a vote, everyone gets an equal say. My guest today argues that democracy might not actually be the most equitable way of making decisions in a society. Jessica Flanigan is a philosopher at the Jepson School of Leadership Studies at the University of Richmond, and she says that egalitarians might want to rethink their commitment to democracy.

**Jessica Flanigan:** There's another problem with democratic decision making, which is that very reliably, often when people are engaged in democratic decision making, that sometimes lends a kind of authorization to political repression by the majority. And it might also lead to an expansion of state power or a legitimation of state power thinking that because state power was authorized by a democratic majority or because the people who showed up to vote supported something, that it's legitimate to expand the discretionary power of public officials over citizens.

**Christiane:** We'll discuss other possible pitfalls of democracy, the value of ideal theory and much more on this episode of Examining Ethics.

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**[interview begins]**

**Christiane:** Jessica Flanigan, welcome to the show. We're talking about your article, "Social Equality and the Stateless Society." So just briefly, what's your argument here?

**Jessica Flanigan:** I argue that a lot of people who purport to be social egalitarians, they'll mistakenly endorse political institutions that are very hierarchical and they overlook the inegalitarianism of being in hierarchical relationships with public officials. And so the purpose of the article is to really highlight that kind of trade off, which is to say that if you want to promote or achieve social equality between people—egalitarian relations—across lines of difference, between different groups or just between citizens as individuals, there's going to be a trade-off potentially between promoting that across the citizenry, kind of horizontally, and promoting equality between citizens who have political power and people who don't have political power, that kind of vertical hierarchy.

So the thing that I say in the article to try to make that point is that in an ideal society, if you're a social egalitarian, it would be a stateless society where everybody related as an equal with one another, and also that political hierarchy were unnecessary. And then in our own society, there's a lot of different ways that we could make that trade off between being equal with each other and equal with respect to public officials.

**Christiane:** So can you help us understand what a social egalitarian is in case we've never heard that phrase before? And then are you a social egalitarian? Is that something that you defend?

**Jessica Flanigan:** I'm sympathetic to social egalitarianism. I think that there are moral reasons. I don't know if there are like enforceable moral requirements necessarily, but there are moral reasons to relate to people as an equal. Sometimes it's called relational egalitarianism. Social egalitarians or relational egalitarians are just people who think that it's very important for people to relate with each other in a way that recognizes their fundamental equal moral status. And also to have a disposition to relate to another in a way that recognizes each other's equal moral status.

For example, patriarchy would be a violation of a principle of social egalitarianism because that would be a set of social norms where men relate to women as subordinates. Racism is a violation of a social egalitarian ideal because that's a social system where white people in a white supremacist society would relate to people of color as if they're inferior. That would be a violation or transgression of that relational egalitarian commitment. But there are other forms of social egalitarianism as well. So for example, many social egalitarians will talk about class hierarchy, where people implicitly treat people who are of lower socioeconomic status as if they have less value in society or they have class related stigma against the poor or the working classes.

I think an example that I believe in is that nationalism undermines egalitarian relationships between people in different countries. So there are a lot of things that we can think of that are violations of social egalitarianism. And then if you want to think of what's a social egalitarian ideal, it would just be a society that didn't have any of those social norms and patterns of hierarchy that we just talked about. So it would be like a society where normatively extraneous features don't determine the distribution of status within a society.

**Christiane:** So you said that you were sympathetic to the view, but maybe you wouldn't necessarily call yourself a social egalitarian.

**Jessica Flanigan:** I would call myself a social egalitarian insofar as I don't think that any of those other forms of hierarchy are permissible. It's tricky though in the sense that sometimes when people talk about social egalitarianism, they think that...they link that view up very, very closely to democracy or to the view that egalitarian political relationships should be enforced between people. And so when I had a bit of pause about, oh, do you identify in this way? I do

identify in that way, but I don't think that that term is always heard in people's ears as representing the view that I hold because I'm a little bit skeptical of thinking that social egalitarianism as a political ideal has this specific interpretation with respect to enforceability or the distribution of political power.

**Christiane Wisehart:** For anyone whose ears pricked up when you mentioned democracy, and maybe being a little bit skeptical of democracy, we will get there because that's really interesting. But first I wanted to ask. If somebody is a social egalitarian, what kind of society is ideal for that mindset?

**Jessica Flanigan:** When we are talking in philosophy in general and we're doing ideal theory, sometimes people will think about what the ideal is in terms of a kind of psychologically or institutionally feasible ideal that we might not be able to get to. But I think if you're going to go for the ideal, go for the ideal. What would be the ideal way for us to live together? And I think that the social egalitarian ideal society would be a stateless society. It would be a society where there's no government hierarchy between public officials and citizens. And also there's no social hierarchy between different groups of citizens. There's no patriarchy, there's no racism, there's no nationalism. But the society of open borders, that would be the ideal. And you sort of see this kind of alliance both within anarchist circles and then also people like Jerry Cohen, who's very socialist, circles where they'll agree on that kind of ideal.

Even Marx says this, ideally the state will fall away and everybody will just comply with their antecedent, with their background moral obligations to treat everybody well and to relate to each other as equals. And everybody will have an egalitarian ethos where they independently want to respect other people's moral equality to them. That would be the ideal. And so in an ideal society, it would be both perfectly egalitarian with respect to political power, but then also with respect to all other kinds of social variances in power. That's the utopia.

**Christiane Wisehart:** So we don't live in the utopia, and I think even social egalitarians would acknowledge, okay, so a stateless society would be great, but that we can't do that, right? At least not in this world right now. So what's a sort of second-best option for a social egalitarian?

**Jessica Flanigan:** A way to think about this is, imagine a picnic spot. It's the greatest picnic spot that you can imagine. What's in your picnic spot? It's got butterflies and it smells like fresh flowers. It's very sunny. It's 77 degrees. It's perfect. Got great food. Unfortunately, this picnic spot is surrounded by a mist that will kill anyone who's not morally perfect. It's even worse than that because even if you were morally perfect, it also you'd have to go across all these rocky spikes, and that would be very difficult to get there in some way.

Given how we are, should we try to go to that picnic spot? No, we should not. It would be a huge hassle and we're not even morally perfect. And so even if we could get there eventually, it would be really hard to even get to the point where it was accessible to us. Did we learn anything from thinking about what that picnic spot was like, about the most perfect picnic spot?

Yes, we did. And is that information useful to us? Yes, it is, because now when I'm picking picnic spots in the actual world, I know what the best would be. And so it's worthwhile to think about what the utopian society would be because then once I have a vision of the utopian society, that gives me information about what kinds of societies we should aspire to in the actual world, which direction should we be walking in politically?

And what I say in this paper is that there are a range of institutional arrangements that would get us closer to the ideal of a social egalitarian, stateless society. There's many different ways that we could arrange society, but one thing that we should be aware of is that not only is the ideal one where everybody relates to each other as an equal, the ideal will also be one where we're not subject to political hierarchy or domination by the government. So when you're asking, well, what would the non-ideal system look like, there's many forms of non-ideal systems, and this paper is very much an intervention to just say whatever the system that you're looking at is though we should be as suspicious of state power and political hierarchy as social egalitarians, as we are of hierarchy between different groups of people. So economic disparities in power or disparities in social status.

**Christiane Wisehart:** So you note that a lot of social egalitarians argue that democracy is the best realistic option, aside from a stateless society. But you write, and we've alluded to this earlier, that we should be a little bit more suspicious of democracy. So you have this really provocative line, and I'll quote it here. You say, "While allowing citizens a vote gives one kind of equal status, democracy also institutionalizes and intensifies other forms of oppression." So first of all, if somebody who's listening to this is like, "Excuse me?," could you explain what you mean there? And then also help us understand if that's the case, then why do so many social egalitarians still favor democratic governments?

**Jessica Flanigan:** Social egalitarians generally will favor democratic governance by the idea of it's very good to give everybody an equal package of political power in the same way that it's good for people to have equal social status or economic power—it's good for everybody to have at least some chance presumptively to participate in government. And if people are excluded from participation in government, then that in itself is stigmatizing or it communicates the view that they're less of a citizen. So when women couldn't vote, that was very rude to women. [laughter] It was like undermining their equal standing in society. We don't let children vote. For some older children, you might think that that's a kind of injustice against teenagers because it communicates to them that their participation isn't valued within the society. And so if you want all citizens to relate as equal citizens, you might think, well, we should give them all equal or somewhat equal political power via elections.

Of course, people don't actually have equal political power. Public officials and people who work for the administrative state have way more political power than the rest of us. But I think that the case for democratic institutions is partly expressive, that it communicates to people that they're viewed as having equal value to their fellow citizens who also can vote. But notice a couple things about this. One is in any political community that is going to enfranchise people to vote,

oftentimes that is going to entrench a kind of nationalist political identity where they're going to overvalue the interest of natives or the interest of citizens or the interest of the people who vote. And then it would undervalue the interest of non-voters, so people like future generations or foreigners. And so by giving everybody within a political community one kind of political equality, you might exacerbate other kinds of political inequality by making it so that they undercount the interest of other people outside of the political community.

For some social egalitarians, they might be comfortable with that trade off because they might say, well, the best we can do is to achieve social egalitarianism within our society, and we're never going to have a world government where everybody, we have open borders and everybody relates as an equal. We're never going to fully consider the interest of future persons or something like that. However, there's another problem with democratic decision making, which is that very reliably, often when people are engaged in democratic decision making that sometimes lends a kind of authorization to political repression by the majority. And it might also lead to an expansion of state power or a legitimation of state power thinking that because state power was authorized by a democratic majority or because the people who showed up to vote supported something, that it's legitimate to expand the discretionary power of public officials over citizens.

And so to the extent that that happens in a democratic society, it could effectively exacerbate hierarchy between people and public officials if there's this kind of expansion of state power or the administrative state through these democratic institutions. And so that's another worrying thing about democracy. That said, you could have a democratic society that's consistent with a very minimal state or a very small state. And if that were to happen, there's something to be said in favor of giving everybody a vote if it expresses this kind of egalitarianism towards them. But I just don't think that the moral reasons in favor of that are especially weighty relative to all of the other kinds of ways of instantiating social equality between people.

**Christiane Wisehart:** So you argue that even in private relationships, maybe relationships within a friend group for example, that if voting comes into play when you're trying to make decisions as a group, then something has gone wrong. And so I wondered if you could explain that, because again, I feel like that's one of those, that's an idea that is maybe challenging for a lot of people.

**Jessica Flanigan:** So a lot of times social egalitarians will motivate the intuition behind social egalitarianism by saying, oh, we should have civic friendship. So you know how you are with your friends, how you relate to them as an equal, you don't look down on them. That's how we should be between citizens. Wouldn't that be a great ideal? Or a companionate marriage is another example. And so they often will very much lean on that kind of analogy in arguing for other social egalitarian policy solutions like workplace democracy or democratic voting.

If you think that, and you take it very seriously, there's another social egalitarian person, Jerry Cohen, who has this argument where it's like "Oh, imagine we're all on a camping trip and we

would all have an egalitarian ethos to try to provide for each other." That makes sense intuitively, I guess. But if you are in a friend group like that and you really are relating as an equal, it's unclear why when you encounter some kind of disagreement or dispute or difficulty, why we should endorse using democratic means to resolve these types of disputes or difficulties. So for example, say that we are all on a camping trip together and we need somebody to make the fire, but nobody wants to make the fire because everybody wants to play cards and hang out or something. And then we all get together and it's a group of a dozen of us and everybody votes that they're going to make you do it.

If anything, that makes it worse that they did that, they took a vote, that's kind of like a less egalitarian approach to doing it than for example, oh, let's just do a lottery about it, or let's try to make some kind of trades or bargains where we can pay this person off. She makes the fire, and then she won't have to do any dishes or something like that. All of those other types of solutions would be much more respectful, I think, in a egalitarian friendship than getting together and having everybody say, oh, we all talked about it and we all decided that you're the person who's going to have to do that, or you're the person who's going to be subject to these types of burdens.

So it's just surprising if we really do think about what an egalitarian friendship would look like, that people will often lean on this civic friendship ideal in justifying democratic institutions. Because if I were ever in a friend group that was using voting in order to justify compelling me to do something or exposing me to some kind of burden that I didn't agree to, and especially if I couldn't leave the friend group for some reason, which is often the case in a political relationship, I would find that to be a very oppressive friend group, even relative to other ways that we could have distributed the burdens of whatever needed to be done on our camping trip or within our friend group.

**Christiane Wisheart:** You've kind of laid out these reasons for why democracy is not the best choice maybe for social egalitarians. So what might you suggest? We can't have a stateless society, right? That's too ideal. So what's your second-best option, or what's your non-ideal option for them?

**Jessica Flanigan:** So if we can imagine that utopian society, the stateless society where everybody relates as an equal, and then we think about where we are today. And in our current circumstances, there's extraordinary amounts of hierarchy, both informal hierarchy between people: there's racism, there's heterosexism, there's patriarchal institutions, there's nativism and nationalism, and there's massive economic inequality that makes it so that people are often stigmatized based on their class. And then there's fat phobia and lookism. There's just so many ways in which we arrange ourselves hierarchically between ourselves. And also, we are massively dominated by political institutions. So I mean, I think we've seen this especially vividly over the past few years with the way that the government responded to COVID. But just more generally, so many of our lives are just heavily structured by political choices, laws, that are shaping our options.

So what drugs you can use or where you can travel or in some places what you can say,, what kind of consumer products you can own, the way that the government structures our lives. So in light of that stateless society utopia, there are so many political reforms available that would move us closer to that utopia, which would be feasible, that would be an improvement on the current situation. And kind of horrifyingly, the current situation is a vast improvement on almost all of human history. And so we're moving towards that morally better way of arranging ourselves by social egalitarian lights. And there's just so many ways we could do it. One way we could do it is that we could try to relate socially between each other in our informal relationships in a more egalitarian way.

Another way that we could do it is we could try to limit the extent to which we are subject to hierarchy from the government, the extent to which we're subject to governmental domination. Empirically it might be the case that there's a trade off between these two values, that in some cases, promoting economic equality or promoting racial justice is going to require some government intervention; for example, redistributive taxation or anti-discrimination law. But we should acknowledge that those types of remedies are themselves making a trade-off across different kinds of social egalitarian values and that ideally, those types of trade-offs would not be necessary.

So when I think about what's my second-best solution, I would endorse any range of second-best solutions. But I would like us to be cognizant of the fact that if we are going to support political reforms that are aiming at achieving more social equality between people, that we acknowledge that that's undermining social equality in a different respect by introducing greater domination of people by public officials.

**Christiane Wisehart:** So what brought you to this work? Why do you care about this?

**Jessica Flanigan:** For this paper specifically, the thing that frustrated me was that often, people who I broadly agree with as social egalitarians, I would see them arguing for these sort of political reforms like democratic institutions or redistributive taxation or policies that would support and encourage workplace democracy, for example. And they were sort of, I thought, insufficiently worried about the expansion of state power to achieve these social egalitarian aims. So a lot of people who were advocating for social egalitarian policies were not even concerned at all with the possibility that this could introduce a different level of repression or domination. And in the philosophical literature, the reason that they were not that worried about that is because they had a sort of procedural view of justice where if something happens by way of a broadly democratic procedure, that that somehow authorizes the use of state power to implement a more social egalitarian policy.

But I don't think that that is true. I don't think that democratic procedures authorize coercion for the reasons that I had just mentioned earlier of even if everybody took a vote on who's going to pay the tab at a restaurant, if we're all out for friends, that still doesn't authorize the group to

hack into my Venmo account and take a bunch of money to pay the bill. So because I'm a lot more skeptical of the legitimacy of a democratic procedure, I thought that social egalitarians in general were really understating and underappreciating the harms of governmental coercion of people.

**Christiane Wisehart:** Is there anything that maybe we skipped over or that I didn't ask you about that you were hoping to talk about?

**Jessica Flanigan:** I do think there's an interesting thing that happens that's a more general upshot of this kind of work, which is about idealization. Oftentimes people will talk about a political ideal and they're like, that's my political ideal. That's what I care about the most. My main value, it's freedom, it's social equality, it's whatever, it's utilitarianism. And then we look at the actual world and they think that there's just a clear line between our current world and whatever that ideal would be, and that there's a set of reforms that we should do implement to walk the pathway towards that ideal. But one thing I try to show in this paper is that given where we are, there are so many different ways that we could get closer to whatever your ideal is. That's like multiply realizable. There are so many reforms. And in political philosophy, I think often people become very attached to their specific political remedies or their specific policy solutions as thinking that that's the only way to make the world more just by the lights of their political ideals.

But there's always going to be trade-offs between different kinds of policies. And there's just so many policy options that are on the table that would improve upon where we are right now, that I think that we should be in that sense much more optimistic about the prospects for making the world more just, because there's just many different constellations of policies that would make trade-offs between different kinds of moral values in ways that would nevertheless on balance be more respectful, more free, more egalitarian, better for people's wellbeing, whatever. On the other hand—that's the optimistic reading and this, I think we should be much more optimistic about the prospects for political philosophy because there's all of these great things on the table. On the other hand, I think we should also be much more realistic about the trade-offs that are involved. And I think oftentimes in political philosophy, people will say, this is my ideal and we should promote my ideal, and then we should just do that sort of uncritically.

We should just assume, yep, this is the pathway to making the world more just. But sometimes if you push on one form of social equality to try to make it so that we could have more egalitarian relations between people that's introducing a different form of inequality somewhere else, it's kind of like a whack-a-mole type situation. It's like you pop down one form of injustice and that's going to create a different kind of injustice. And I also think that we should be more mindful of those types of trade-offs involved. So the very thing that makes it so that there's so many ways that we could improve upon that status quo and trade off on these different values, that's the optimistic reading.



But on the pessimistic reading, it's like every way of improving upon the status quo is going to have some kind of trade off, or it's going to involve us to make difficult calls. And there's just no specific pathway from here to utopia that's not going to involve making difficult calls and hard trade-offs. But there's so many pathways we can take, so you can read it either way, depending on whether you're an optimist or a pessimist. But either way, that intervention I think is an important intervention to the kind of non-ideal theory, ideal theory literature.

**[Interview ends]**

**[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Borough]**

**Christiane:** If you want to find more about our guest's other work, download a transcript, or learn about some of the things we mentioned in today's episode visit [prindleinstitute.org/examining-ethics](http://prindleinstitute.org/examining-ethics).

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