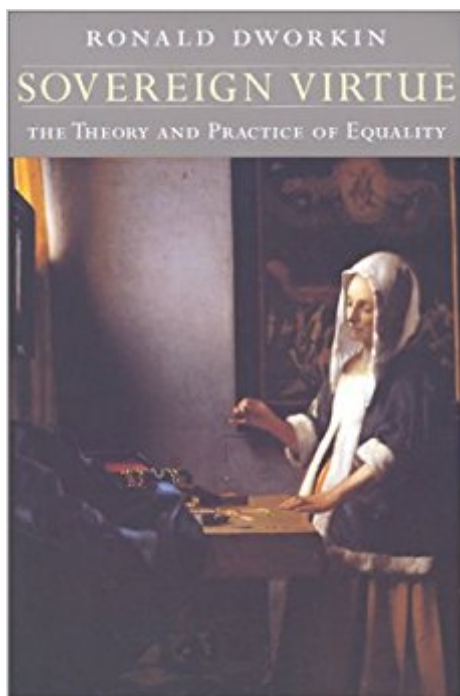


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Sovereign Virtue: The Theory And Practice Of Equality



Synopsis

Equality is the endangered species of political ideals. Even left-of-center politicians reject equality as an ideal: government must combat poverty, they say, but need not strive that its citizens be equal in any dimension. In his new book Ronald Dworkin insists, to the contrary, that equality is the indispensable virtue of democratic sovereignty. A legitimate government must treat all its citizens as equals, that is, with equal respect and concern, and, since the economic distribution that any society achieves is mainly the consequence of its system of law and policy, that requirement imposes serious egalitarian constraints on that distribution. What distribution of a nation's wealth is demanded by equal concern for all? Dworkin draws upon two fundamental humanist principles--first, it is of equal objective importance that all human lives flourish, and second, each person is responsible for defining and achieving the flourishing of his or her own life--to ground his well-known thesis that true equality means equality in the value of the resources that each person commands, not in the success he or she achieves. Equality, freedom, and individual responsibility are therefore not in conflict, but flow from and into one another as facets of the same humanist conception of life and politics. Since no abstract political theory can be understood except in the context of actual and complex political issues, Dworkin develops his thesis by applying it to heated contemporary controversies about the distribution of health care, unemployment benefits, campaign finance reform, affirmative action, assisted suicide, and genetic engineering.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In this ambitious investigation into the very bedrock of a democratic society, Dworkin, one of our

leading legal thinkers (he teaches at NYU), explores the "popular but mysterious political ideal" of equality, looking into its theoretical underpinnings and then showing how a proper conception of equality informs hot-button issues such as campaign finance reform, affirmative action and antisodomy laws. Dworkin (*Freedom's Law*) advocates a fundamental "equality of resources," arguing that government must provide a form of material equality for everyone. In probing this proposition, he rejects conservative and paternalistic notions of democracy, advocating an "ethical individualism" that makes it government's obligation to treat the life of each person as having great and equal importance. Many of the questions Dworkin raises are of grave concern for America as it faces a new century: What form of democracy is most appropriate to an egalitarian society? How much should a nation like ours spend on its citizens' health? What are the ethical implications of genetic engineering? While in places his abstract discussions of liberty and democracy can be slow going, Dworkin also offers refreshingly pointed commentary on the 1996 Welfare Reform Act ("a plain defeat for social justice"), America's lack of national health-care coverage (a "national disgrace") and other important issues. Two chapters on affirmative action, in which Dworkin argues that sketchy factual evidence about race-based admissions has distorted the debate, are especially insightful. Whatever one's political convictions, it is difficult not to be moved by this book's final, forceful imperative that human lives be successful rather than wasted. (June) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Drawing from his expertise as a philosopher and legal theorist, Dworkin (law and philosophy, NYU) discusses the ethical foundations of conflicting political ideologies and strives for a consensus that explains human behavior. Central to this notion is the Aristotelian concept of *akrasia* (literally, "lack of self-control," this term has come to mean, among other things, "acting against one's considered judgment"), which he explicates thoroughly as he relates it to issues confronting contemporary politicians. As Dworkin sees it, the magnanimity of virtue imbues the political mind with an enlightened form of self-interest that has the potential to override immediate or corporeal self-interests of time, money, and labor. Dworkin frames this dichotomy in terms of a struggle between critical and volitional interests in which people actually spurn self-enhancing political concepts (such as a tax cut) in favor of more altruistic objectives. He concludes by noting that as human beings suppress their individual volitional interests, society will witness an increasing level of attention to the critical interests of humankind as a whole. Highly recommended for academic libraries. DPhilip Y. Blue, New York State Supreme Court Criminal Branch Law Lib., New York Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable

edition of this title.

To libertarians out there...read this book and you will understand exactly why liberalism has changed in America. Brilliant, provocative and insightful all around. I pick it up every year or so and re-read certain sections for fun. If you can understand his points (particularly about hypothetical insurance markets) you will be hard pressed to disagree with them. I desperately wish this book would get the credit it deserves.

Just as physicists search for the unifying theory of particle physics and the universe, Professor Dworkin here presents a theory that unifies the sometimes conflicting aspirations of liberty and equality. As usual, his work is not only replete with insights but is frequently extremely profound - especially when he explains what should have been obvious to us but has somehow eluded our vision. Dworkin explains how liberty should not compromise equality without in turn compromising liberty itself. He gives us a new tool for evaluating the merits of changes in the law. As a lawyer and educator, I find this to be a very readable and noteworthy contribution to legal philosophy.

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Ron Dworkin doesn't work through his views very well if this book is characteristic of his thinking. In the first few chapters, he builds an imaginary world in which the government confiscates (read taxation) all resources in the nation and auctions them off evenly among the population. But auctions are just the beginning of his idealistic approach to political philosophy. True, this portion of the book is theory, but his theories are fantasies. They're not realistic at all. The second half of the book is his attempt to put into practice the idealistic proposals in the first half. I found this book good as a text if you want to teach a class on contemporary political philosophy, but only if you are looking to get your students thinking about a large number of current issues and improve their critical thinking skills. If you're trying to give them examples of how to think or give a good representation of solid liberal political thought, I would pass this one by. Let me give an example of Dworkin's bias and poor research. In Chapter 11, "Affirmative Action, Does It Work?", Dworkin's answer is a profound "YES!!" But to support his view, he uses one study and one study alone, Bowen and Bok's "The Shape of the River." He only mentions "American in Black and White" which, by the way, destroys his argument. The River study looks only at a very narrow sample, blacks in elite educational institutions. As a friend and fellow student said, "If I were to write chapter 11 as a term paper, it

would have been returned to me with an extremely low grade or a request to support my view with more research." The reader gets the idea that either Dworkin couldn't find any other material which supported his view, or he was just lazy in looking. Which brings up another interesting facet of this book. It seems Dworkin came to the table with views and looked for materials to support those views. He does not come across as open and objective at all. Sovereign Virtue gives the impression Dworkin may have sat down and knocked this out in a weekend or two without any peer review. If you're interested in philosophy, especially liberal democratic political philosophy, look elsewhere. Al Franken might even be a better choice, but less of a joke.

If you're willing to expend the energy on Dworkin's dense, abstract prose in the first section, you'll be rewarded in the second section wherein he applies his abstractions to tough issues like national healthcare, and genetic manipulation. Dworkin sometimes sounds like an insurance analyst -- he tends to think in terms of spreading risk across populations. He also likes to build models to help conceptualize the distribution of risk and reward in society. These models, fully understood, provide a means of gauging all kinds of propositions: propositions about genetic experimentation, economic inequality, healthcare, to name just a few that he covers in the second section. The problem is that it takes a long time for Dworkin to set up these models that one begins to lose sight of just why such a conceptual tool might be worthwhile (for instance, a desert island where everyone arrives on an equal footing and the auction that ensues to distribute resources equally according to preference.) At the same time, there is something heartening about Dworkin's insistence that rationality can prevail, that reasonable people can agree on certain basic assumptions about the importance of public goods and ways in which these goods might be attained. One wants to believe that this is the case, in spite of considerable evidence to the contrary, especially in our current political discourse, so polarized as not to admit any room for the intrusion of reason. A noble try, really. Overall, a tough book, but a rewarding one.

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