

An Answer to Inequity

By Theodore Dalrymple

Whenever I hear the word *equity*, my heart sinks, though I won't go as far as to say that I reach for my Browning. My irritation on hearing the word is recent, however: I don't think I would have reacted the same way forty years ago, when it was rarely used outside the context of the law.



Woke ideology has given equity—the quality of fairness or impartiality—a bad name, because in wokespeak equity as traditionally understood is deemed inequitable. For example, to be color-blind (as far as individuals of different human

racess is concerned) is to be equitable in the old sense, but inequitable in the new sense because such equity does not necessarily lead to equality of outcome, in fact it is pretty certain not to do so.

According to wokespeak, equity is that which leads to equality of outcome between both groups and individuals, and therefore compels unfairness in its treatment of both groups and individuals. As Orwell put it in *Nineteen Eight-Four*, freedom is slavery.

The fundamental error in all this was pointed out by Thomas Sowell, who thought that modern liberals, and *a fortiori* those who were woke, were in search of cosmic justice, that is to say a situation in which the universe, the world, and the whole of human life could and should be made perfectly fair. The English novelist L.P. Hartley lampooned this idea in 1960 in his novel *Facial Justice*, in which people who, through no merit of their own, were particularly good-looking were forced to go through surgery to make them only average-looking; and thus the prejudice in favor of the good-looking would be overcome. Unfortunately, lampoons have a quality of prophecy about them these days.

The demand for equality of outcome is, at heart, a revolt against the very notion of justice, since justice as normally conceived implies desert. But according to woke ideology, there is no such thing as desert, since everyone is the product of his genes over which he has no control and his circumstances over which he equally has no control. Hence justice can only be the equal repartition of the goods of this world, without reference to individual abilities or efforts.

Let us take a startling recent example of what the woke would no doubt call inequity: It appeared in the *Archives of Internal Medicine*. A study of firearm injuries suffered by minors in the St. Louis, Missouri, region, of which there were 1,340 cases in ten years, found that those who had been injured once were at high risk of being injured again shortly afterward, 6 percent in one year and 14 percent in five years. This, of course, is inequitable in itself: Surely the risk should be spread evenly throughout the population?

But the greatest inequity was in the sex and race of the injured. 84 percent were male, 12 percent were white, and 87 percent were black. Of those who suffered a second firearm injury, 98 percent were black.

The policy implications from the point of view of equity are

obvious. Since it is far easier to get people to behave worse than to get them to behave better, the gross underrepresentation of females in the statistics suggests that everything possible should be done to encourage more firearm injuries among female minors, to bring them up to scratch, as it were, with male minor firearm injuries. And it does indeed seem to be that some slight efforts in this direction are being made: For example, the ratio of films in which young women carry Kalashnikovs to those who carry handbags has risen very quickly of late. This can only be applauded by those for whom firearm injury equity is important, but more must be done.

The racial disparity must also be addressed. It would surely be wrong, even if it were possible, to reduce firearm injuries among black minors; for that would, or at least might, imply that there was something not quite right about the way they, or their parents and neighbors, were living, and this would wound their self-esteem.

The better and more practicable approach would be to increase the rate of firearm injuries among white minors, if necessary by the handout of guns with little precautionary information to such minors. Moral education, to the effect that retribution or armed robbery is normal, might also be helpful.

The fact that the disparity is even greater among those who suffer more than one firearm injury must also be addressed, by for example discouraging the parents of the minors who have been shot once from taking precautions against a second episode. Perhaps a system of rewards for those injured more than once could be instituted, along the lines of the heroines-of-motherhood awards in communist countries for mothers who had more than five children.

For those who would say that firearm injuries are bad in themselves, I would reply that first, they are the consequence of self-expression, which is vitally important, especially for

the downtrodden, and second, that attempts at reduction must be very cautious, lest they widen disparities further. For example, if you could reduce the number of firearm injuries suffered by black minors by twenty and those of white minors by ten, which superficial thinkers or conservatives might thoughtlessly welcome, the disparity between blacks and whites, already wide, would widen yet further, and thus would inequity increase.

Years ago, I heard a British minister say that she was determined to eliminate *all* the disparities between men and women—she repeated *all*. I asked whether she meant that men should live longer or women shorter lives. At this point, a civil servant jumped out from the background to defend her minister from the need to think for herself and not merely in clichés, as was her wont. “That,” said the civil servant, “is not a serious question,” though in fact it went straight to the heart of the matter.

But in this vale of tears, it seems, going straight to the heart of the matter is both unwelcome and unimportant. The mouthing of sentiments without examination of their presuppositions, their implications, their corollaries, and their consequences is all that is necessary to obtain a reputation for wisdom and goodness.

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